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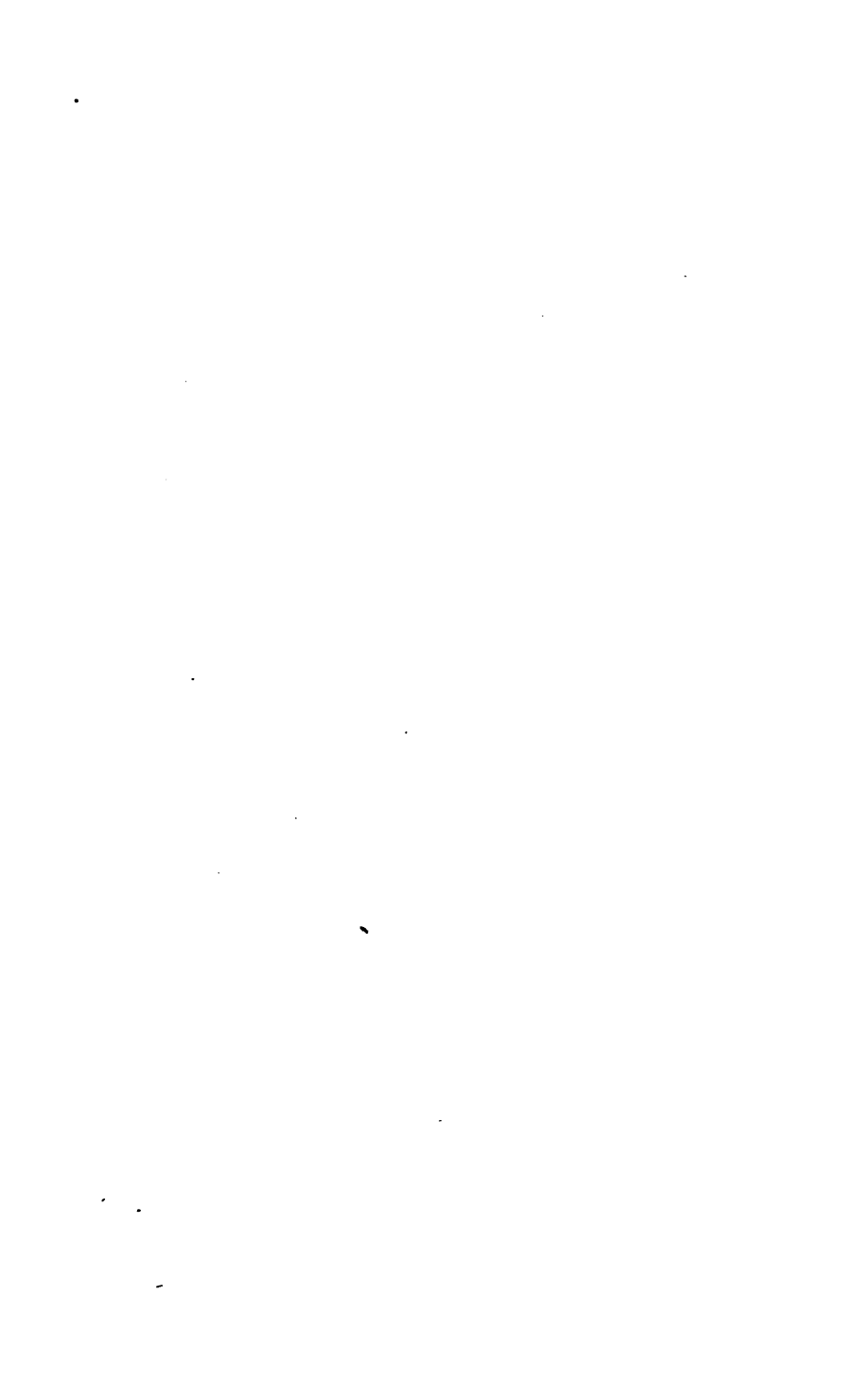




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THE LOVELY MRS. PEMBERTON



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The

Lovely Mrs. Pemberton

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN, pseud.
Mrs. Florence Alice (Price) James
AUTHOR OF

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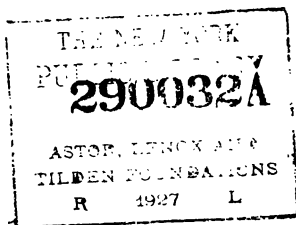
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Mrs. Pemberton

THE LOVELY MRS. PEMBERTON.

CHAPTER I.

"GOOD gracious ! Peter, what do you think ? William's dead !"

"Who's William ?"

And Peter, as he looked up dreamily, with his coffee cup in one hand, and with the other hand marking his place in *The Law Times*, was evidently quite at a loss to understand his aunt's excitement.

But Miss Pemberton had already risen from her seat at the breakfast-table, and walking across the room to the window, which indeed was only a few steps away from the small table in the small room, stood in the shelter of the dingy wire blind furtively wiping her eyes before she could read to the end of the black-edged letter in her hand. She did not, therefore, at once reply to her nephew ; not, indeed, until he had waited for her to fold the letter, when he repeated his question.

Miss Pemberton wiped her eyes again and came back to the table.

"Why, William Ince, the husband of my poor Cousin Marion. She was not a Pemberton ; I don't suppose you ever heard of her."

"No, I don't think I ever did," said Peter, sympathetically.

Miss Pemberton did not seem in the humor to say

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

anything more, and her nephew looked at her, still with his hand on *The Law Times*, as if undecided whether she would prefer to confide in him further or keep her own counsel and let him go on with his reading. It was characteristic of the man that he so waited. For Peter Pemberton was a kind-natured fellow, innately courteous and considerate for others.

Although he was not more than seven or eight-and-twenty, he had taken life so seriously, and devoted himself to the business as a country solicitor which his father had left him so earnestly, that he looked some years more than his age. His shoulders were rounder than they should have been, and there were already white hairs in his light brown hair. His clean-shaven face, indeed, was unwrinkled as yet ; but his blue eyes had the thoughtful look of a man constantly immersed in business, and there were not wanting signs about the mouth to indicate that the furrows might be expected early.

He had just lowered his eyes once more upon his paper when his aunt heaved a deep sigh.

“Poor Marion ! And with all those girls !”

Then Peter felt that he was bound to speak.

“Lancashire people ?” he asked gently, not being able to think of any form of words more appropriate.

“Yes,” said Miss Pemberton, solemnly. “William Ince was a curate in Preston, and now his poor wife is left with three girls, one of them little better than an invalid. She has a little money of her own, but not enough, not nearly enough. I’m sure I don’t know what they’ll all do. May and Anne will have to be governesses, I suppose !”

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Peter looked slightly more interested.

"Oh, but that's such a beastly life for a girl," said he. "Perhaps they'll marry. Are they pretty?"

At this last question Miss Pemberton pursed up her lips with the instinctive gesture of the spinster of mature years.

"I am sure I don't know," she said quickly. "Poor Marion was never a beauty, and I don't suppose her daughters are particularly handsome."

"You haven't seen them for some time, I suppose?"

"Not for years. When I remember them, Lilian, the invalid, was a fragile-looking little creature with very sweet blue eyes. But Anne and May were not good-looking; they were only fat, commonplace little things. Not that it matters. The great thing is whether they are capable, self-reliant girls, able to fight the world for themselves."

"Poor things!" said her nephew, as he rose from the table and stood on the worn hearth-rug, with his back to the fire. The October sunshine streamed in through the small panes of the window and showed up the bare simplicity of the little room. "Couldn't you invite them down here, aunt? It would be livelier for you, wouldn't it, to have girls about? And it would take them off the mother's hands. And perhaps we could marry them off down here; you ladies delight in match-making, don't you?"

But the glance of horror which Miss Pemberton threw at her nephew as he let these suggestions slip out of his mouth in the easiest way imaginable, while he rolled his after-breakfast cigarette, showed that if indeed match-making were a favorite pursuit with the rest of

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

her sex she herself was wholly free from that vice. She drew a long breath before she could answer him ; he looked up, and, perceiving the expression on her face, began to laugh a little.

“Don’t you think it’s a good idea ?” said he.

“No. Emphatically I don’t,” said the lady, in most decisive tones. I think it would be madness for them to delay starting on their new life. After all, they must have become governesses sooner or later, even if their father had lived. And I don’t at all agree with you that it’s such a hardship for a well-brought-up, energetic girl to have to earn her own living.”

She ignored the marriage-making suggestion, and preferred to treat it as an indiscretion which ought never to have been uttered.

“Well,” persisted Peter, with unexpected doggedness of purpose, “let’s have them here at any rate, and find out whether they are the sort of girls who could take to governessing.”

“They’ll have to take to it,” retorted his aunt, rather sharply. “There’s nothing else, you know.”

Peter rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“I wonder,” he said musingly, after a short pause, “which we ought to be sorriest for—the children who get dumped down with a governess who isn’t cut out for that sort of thing, or the girl herself who is dumped down among a lot of children and who can’t teach them anything, and hates having to try ?”

“I don’t understand you this morning,” said Miss Pemberton, turning upon her nephew a look of almost agitated inquiry.

And Peter flushed a very little, conscious that he did,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

indeed, as a rule, show so little interest in social questions that he could not touch upon one without giving the impression of doing something remarkable.

"Oh, I don't know what made that come into my head," he said, almost apologetically, as he took up his paper and walked across to the door. There, however, he stopped a moment, and after staring at the panels for a moment in silence, said, without turning his head, "After all I suppose this place would seem duller to the girls than their own home."

"Of course it would," said Miss Pemberton, dryly.

And he went out and across the narrow passage which divided the small sitting-room from that larger one which was his office, as it had been that of his father before him.

But the idea he had once got into his head came back to him again and again. In the course of his dull morning's work among his parchments and papers the thought of the poor, harassed mother, and of the girls who had to earn their own living whether they liked it or not, returned to him so often that at last he went in search of his aunt, and without preface said :

"Aunt, I want you to write to Mrs. Thing and tell her to send the girls down here for a month."

Miss Pemberton was aghast. She was standing in the middle of the big, stone-flagged, old-fashioned kitchen, which was out of all proportion to the size of the rest of the little house in St. Dunstan's, Bredinsbury, where she and her nephew resided.

"My dear Peter——" she began.

But she had not got further before she saw on the young solicitor's face that dogged look which, in a quiet,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

undemonstrative man of his type, signifies that he has made up his mind. Miss Pemberton had had enough experience of his unworthy sex to know that she must give way.

“Oh, very well. Of course, if you wish it——” she began coldly.

But Peter did not wait to hear more. He just gave her a nod by way of acknowledgment and promptly returned to his work.

She was wise enough to make no sort of further opposition to her nephew's unaccountable whim; and he himself made no allusion to it when they met at their early dinner.

But there came a certain curious change over both aunt and nephew in the course of the next few days. Both felt that some change in their lives was impending. Miss Pemberton, who had kept house for her brother in his lifetime, and for the last two years had performed the same service for his son, felt uneasy at the prospect of this disturbance.

Peter was so quiet in his habits, and had taken so little notice of such youth and beauty as Bredinsbury boasted, that she had had a comfortable feeling that he was absorbed in the dull routine of his work, and that he would be content with quiet bachelordom to the end of his days.

Now, however, she had an inkling that this whim of his for bringing a couple of girls into his little household portended a certain restiveness, which might lead to awful consequences if either of the Ince girls should prove at all attractive. She could only trust, poor, dear lady, that May and Anne had inherited the large

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

features and gaunt figure of their father, or the snub nose and undistinguished countenance of their good mother. Happily, too, there were two of them coming—if they should come. And there is safety in numbers.

Now while these doubts and fears were agitating the aunt, the nephew, quite innocent of any intention of permanently altering his way of life, was only conscious that a little change from the monotony of his existence would be pleasant while it lasted. A little youth about the place would give a fresh stimulus, he thought, both to himself and to his aunt; and as he had no such sinister intention of taking to himself a wife, as Miss Pemberton half credited him with, the fact that he had been warned not to expect beauty in his guests caused him no uneasiness.

Almost by return of post Miss Pemberton got an answer to the letter in which she had, somewhat perfunctorily and grudgingly, given her nephew's invitation. She read the letter through with a perceptibly lengthening countenance, and then passed it to her nephew with a rather frigid word or two of explanation.

Peter read it from beginning to end, and smiled as he gave it back.

"The old lady seems pleased, doesn't she?" said he, with a slight air of triumph. "Says she will never cease to be grateful for your kindness."

"It's not my kindness," said his aunt, icily, "if it's kindness at all."

Amiable as Peter was, he did not like this tone of cold opposition to a plan of which he felt rather proud.

"If I had thought you wouldn't be kind to them, aunt," he said, with as much anger as he ever showed

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

in domestic matters, "I wouldn't have asked you to send for the girls."

"There's no question of that," said Miss Pemberton, instinctively relaxing her austerity a little. "But you yourself said they'd be dull here, didn't you?"

"Well, so soon after their father's death they will hardly expect to be very lively anywhere," retorted Peter, aptly enough. "There's the cathedral for them to see, and we can hire a trap for you to show them the country; that's quite as much gayety as they'll care about."

"Oh, yes, of course, but we've only this one small sitting-room, you know——"

"Well, there's a good big bedroom unused since my father died. Perhaps we could rig it up with a writing-table and a sofa, and make a bed-sitting-room of it for them?"

He was so obstinate that Miss Pemberton wisely put no more obstacles of any sort in the way. She even entered with an appearance of good humor into the preparations for the coming of the girls, and expressed some civil disappointment on learning that they would not be able to pay the projected visit for some weeks. Mrs. Ince and poor feeble Lilian had broken down under the blow of their loss, and the other two girls would not leave them until they had recovered a little from it.

Peter took the postponement very quietly, and said little about the proposed visit until Christmas came, and with it a letter from Mrs. Ince, saying that, if it was now convenient for dear Ellen and Ellen's dear nephew to receive them, May and Nannie could come to Bredinsbury without further delay.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

So a day was fixed, the big double-bedded room was got ready, and a turkey, jellies and a magnificent dessert were provided for a banquet of welcome to the young strangers.

They were to arrive by the train which left London at 4.20 and reached Bredinsbury at 6.18. As the little house in St. Dunstan's was not more than five minutes' walk from the station, Miss Pemberton suggested that she would meet the girls herself, and that they would walk back to the house, leaving the luggage to be brought round by a porter on a barrow.

"No, we won't do that," said Peter. "It doesn't look hospitable enough. I'll go and meet them while you superintend arrangements indoors. Don't you think that would be best?"

As he said it in a way that showed he had made up his mind, his aunt acquiesced in this arrangement, and on the day fixed Peter put on his best overcoat and was at the station some minutes before the train was due.

As it was a foggy night, and as the line was the South-Eastern, of course the train was very late. When it did at last steam into the station a disappointment was in store for Peter.

He knew the girls would travel third-class for economy's sake, and he had anticipated no difficulty whatever in identifying them, especially as they had been told to look out for him. But although he eagerly scanned the passengers, both before and after they got out of the carriages, it was all in vain. No two girls in black, looking out for some one to meet them, could he discover from one end of the train to the other.

What had happened? Had they been detained at

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Preston at the last moment? Had they lost the train they had to catch at Charing Cross?

Peter grew quite excited as the crowd on the platform began to thin without his having found the two girls in black of whom he was in search. As he went quickly up and down at a pace much brisker than his usual sedate trot, carefully examining each group, he presently got a little shock of surprise and doubt on finding himself face to face, not with two girls, but with two women who could not, he thought, be less than thirty-five years old, both wearing an air of rusty dowdiness which caused him uneasy qualms. He had not expected beauty in his guests, but at least he had looked forward to youth.

Yet this was the only pair of travelers who appeared to be waiting about, and the expression with which they did so seemed to augur badly for their reception of the person who was to meet them. Could it be that these two somewhat sour-looking spinsters——

As he framed half a question to himself, with some inward trepidation, Peter turned abruptly, and going in the opposite direction at a great pace, looked about him more assiduously than ever. And as he did so, his eyes fell upon a young girl, fresh-faced, innocent-looking, bright of eye and plump of cheek, who, wrapped round with an old-fashioned gray shawl, stood in the light of one of the station lamps and looked about her.

Peter was not impressionable where the other sex was concerned. But there was something that attracted him so much in this girl's face that he found himself casting furtive glances at her again and again, while

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

he continued his search for the two young ladies in black.

With a deep sinking of the heart, and at the same time a half-comical feeling that he was rightly served for his precipitate invitation, Peter had at last made up his mind that the two sour-faced women were indeed the Misses Ince, and was approaching them with a greeting on his lips, when he heard rapid steps behind him, and a voice saying :

“ Oh, oh, I beg your pardon——”

The voice—it was a nice voice, a voice like a bell, that rang with youth—caused him to turn at once. With a most curious sensation which he could not have defined he found that the owner of the voice was the pretty girl in the gray shawl.

“ Oh,” said she again, “ are you Mr. Pemberton ? ”

Peter stammered as he answered, raising his hat and looking down at the girl—for she was a little thing—with rising color.

“ Yes. Er-er-er. You’re not one of the Miss Inces, are you ? ”

“ Yes, I am. I’m Nannie—that is, I’m Anne. And oh, I’m so sorry to disappoint you and Miss Pemberton. But just at the last, you know, when it was too late to write or anything, May got asked to stay with Lady Capenhurst, to be a companion to her daughter. And mama thought it was such a good chance she didn’t like to refuse. I do hope you don’t mind my coming by myself ? ”

“ N-n-n-not at all,” said Peter.

It was a stupid thing to say, but he couldn’t think of anything better just then.

CHAPTER II.

"Is this all your luggage?" asked Peter Pemberton, looking down upon the small trunk by Miss Ince's side, and beckoning to a porter.

"Yes, that's all except my bag."

Peter took the bag from her and directed the porter to put the trunk on a cab. Then he took Nannie through the underground passage to the other side of the station, put her into the cab, and saying, "It's only a very little way," raised his hat to her again and got upon the box beside the driver.

He felt shy and awkward and altogether unlike himself. Conscious of this, he attributed the fact to his astonishment at finding only one girl instead of two. Not that he was disappointed; indeed, he told himself that he liked this arrangement far better than the other. And Miss Pemberton would be pleased, so he innocently thought, as one visitor would be easier to entertain, easier to dispose of, than two would have been. He felt sure she would be as much pleased as he with the fresh face and shy, girlish manners of "Nannie—that is, Anne," as she had called herself.

Unfortunately, things did not turn out quite so well as he had expected. For, in the first place, Miss Pemberton was scandalized by the unnecessary expense he had incurred in taking a cab, "When a healthy girl

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

would have been glad of a walk." And, in the next, the fact that Nannie was wearing a gray shawl, when she should have been enveloped from head to foot in unrelieved black, shocked her sense of propriety.

However, she greeted Nannie with formal kindness, expressed somewhat qualified pleasure on hearing that May had already made a start in life, and took her visitor up-stairs to the room she was to occupy, with very few words to Peter.

Dinner was already laid, and Peter, as he stood on the hearth-rug, with his back to the fire, admired the effect of the heavy, old-fashioned epergne, which had been transferred from the sideboard to the dinner-table in honor of the occasion, and which, indeed, took up more than its fair share of available space. He had himself cut the chrysanthemums and ferns to put in the little glasses. His flowers were a hobby with him, tolerated rather than sympathized with by his aunt, whose tendencies were strongly utilitarian.

In a few minutes Miss Pemberton came down-stairs again and entered the dining-room, wearing a look of satisfaction which caused him—why, he did not exactly know—a certain vague uneasiness. In the uneventful domestic life aunt and nephew led together, looks and tones became important things.

"Well?" said Peter, cheerfully, eying the good lady askance as she cast a look of very qualified approval at the table and the preparations for the feast.

"'M?" said she, as if inviting him to speak first.

Made suddenly aware that the ground was not quite safe, Peter did not ask the question which was upon his lips. He only said :

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Pity the sister couldn't come, wasn't it?"

"I don't know about its being a pity. It's a very good thing that she's found something to do, and I hope that Anne will follow her example as quickly as possible."

"Well, give her a little time. She's very young," suggested Peter.

"Quite old enough to earn her own living, since she has to do it," said Miss Pemberton. "She's eighteen; she told me so. She's grown up curiously like what she was as a child; the same fat, commonplace face, and the same snub nose. Not that I think any the worse of her for not being handsome. She seems a pleasant sort of girl enough, as far as one can judge on a first acquaintance."

Peter was wise enough to say nothing. He was, indeed, for a moment quite overwhelmed with amazement that anybody should take such a wholly different view of Anne Ince's appearance from that he took himself. To him the fresh-colored, rounded cheeks, the bright eyes, the soft dark hair he had seen under her hat as he followed her through the tunnel, had formed a combination of charms which he found quite dazzling.

He had the sense to see, however, that a discussion on the subject was to be avoided. But his aunt was not satisfied with his silence. She had another little dart in store for him.

"It appears you were both looking for each other for a long time before she spoke to you?" she said, as she picked off some of the dead under petals of the late chrysanthemums.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Yes," said Peter, eagerly, quite glad to have got to a safe topic; "you see I was looking about for two girls, and I thought they would be all in black. I'd forgotten they might be wrapped up for a journey in shawls and things."

"And I certainly think, if she had to wear a shawl, it should have been a black one," said his aunt, rather sharply.

But Peter, with sane good-nature, made a shrewd suggestion as to this anomaly.

"I suppose," he said, "that there wasn't much money to spare for extras, and that Miss Ince had to use some old wrap of her mother's to put round her knees and shoulders during the journey."

Miss Pemberton shrugged her shoulders. After a short pause she laughed a little.

"I didn't tell you, by the bye, how it was she didn't recognize you sooner," she said. "It seems she has seen a portrait of your father when he was a young man, and so she had got it into her head that she would recognize you by the likeness. Only you did not come up to the standard set by the picture."

Now Peter was not a vain man, but he did not quite like this criticism passed upon his looks by the pretty visitor. He kept the slight vexation he felt out of his tone, however, and only said:

"I wasn't handsome enough, eh?"

"Oh, of course Miss Ince didn't say so in those words, but I think that was what she meant."

"Well, I'm not an Apollo, certainly," said Peter, modestly. "And my father was, I suppose."

Somehow Miss Pemberton wished she had not given

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

her nephew this somewhat garbled account of what the girl had said about Peter's appearance. Little anecdotes of this sort are apt to lead to explanations ; and explanations between young persons of opposite sex were, Miss Pemberton thought, things to be avoided.

There was no time to say more, for they heard a foot-step on the linoleum which covered the stairs, and then the door was opened timidly and the fresh face of Nannie Ince appeared at it.

"This way, didn't you tell me?" said Nannie.

"Yes, this is right. Come in, dear."

Peter was offering her the armchair below the fireplace near the window.

"This is a very modest establishment, you know, Miss Ince," said he, "and this is our only sitting-room. What ought to be the drawing-room is given up to me and my clerk for an office."

"But there's quite room enough for homely people like ourselves," said Miss Pemberton, with a slight touch of severity, as if reprobating any hankering after gorgeous reception-rooms on the part of her nephew. "We lead a very quiet life—so quiet that I'm afraid you may find it rather dull."

"Oh, no, I sha'n't," said Nannie, brightly, as she smiled at her hostess. "I think this place is lovely, and this pretty old-fashioned room just as cosy and delightful as possible."

And her eyes roved from the old pine-wood paneling, which had been spoilt by a thick coating of yellow varnish, to the glories of the epergne and Peter's flowers. She evidently felt all a young girl's fresh delight in novel surroundings ; and Peter thought, as he looked

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

at her, that she had told the truth ; she could never be dull anywhere, and she liked everything, because she carried her brightness about with her and because her vitality made living itself a joy. It was so new to him, this vivacity of temperament, that it dazzled as well as delighted him. This was the first young girl whom he had met in the intimacy of home life. Already he was steeped in the woman influence, was held fast in the woman fascination. He was quite thankful that she had got on a subject upon which he could speak, so that he might look at her, so that his own shy eyes might meet the brightness of hers.

“You like paneled walls, then ? And you like flowers ?” said he.

“Indeed I do. These chrysanthemums are very late, aren’t they ? They’re all over near us, I think.”

“I kept those back,” said Peter, the enthusiasm of the amateur beginning to peep out in his tone. “When I knew you young ladies wouldn’t be here till after Christmas I did my best to have some to show you. But they’re very poor compared with those we had in November,” he added earnestly.

“I think they’re beautiful.”

“I hope you don’t mind dining as late as this ?” said Miss Pemberton, as Hannah brought in the turkey.

“Oh, I like late dinner much better than early dinner. I’m so glad you have it here.”

“Oh, we don’t generally,” Miss Pemberton explained, somewhat scandalized by the suggestion. “We generally dine in the middle of the day.”

“But we can always dine late while you’re here if you like it better,” put in Peter, readily. “I like it

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

better myself—much better. Then there's no smell of mutton through the house if a client comes in about three. That's the worst of such a small house as ours; three times a week, for three or four hours, the place is steeped in mutton."

Peter did not generally express himself with so much vivacity of phrase, and Miss Pemberton was bewildered both by his tirade and by the burst of delighted girlish laughter with which the bright-eyed visitor received it. It was quite a new sensation for Peter to be making little jokes, and a sensation newer still to find them laughed at. So he joined in the girl's merriment with a subdued laugh of his own, having caught the infection of her enjoyment.

But the infection did not extend to Miss Pemberton.

"Of course, if you wish it, Peter, I can turn all the household arrangements upside down immediately, though I'm quite sure Hannah will give warning when she finds she's expected to find late dinner every day, instead of our going on in the simple fashion which was considered proper by your father, and by you till this moment."

As these chilling words fell from the lady's lips a horrid silence seized the two young people. Nannie became conscious that the atmosphere of the cosy old-fashioned house left something to be desired, and Peter for once felt sullenly rebellious.

"Of course I yield to your convenience, aunt, as I have always done," said he, with such an unexpected accession of quiet dignity that that austere lady understood that she was going too far, and began instantly to make amends.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"I'm sure Anne will cheerfully put up with our arrangements, Peter," she said in a gentle voice.

"Oh, yes, yes, I never thought—" began Nannie, in quite a frightened tone.

Peter gave her a reassuring look, and Miss Pemberton hastened to add :

"I quite agree with you that late dinner is best in great houses where a large staff of servants is kept, and for those who have always been used to it. But here it really is, as I think you'll admit, my dear, out of the question. And the clients expect the smell of mutton about three ; they find it in the houses of other solicitors, and they're used to it."

Peter was still rebellious.

"I never get used to it," said he, under his breath, as he took his place at the table.

After this rather unfortunate beginning, things improved a little. Nannie perceived that she would have to keep a watch upon her tongue, and upon her sense of fun, and devoted herself to the task of answering Miss Pemberton's long string of questions about her mother and her family with due fulness and discretion. Peter was left out altogether, and ate his dinner almost in silence.

There was a piano in the corner of the room, and when the table was cleared, Nannie was requested by Miss Pemberton to give them a little music. The girl, however, could not play from memory, and had earned some small sarcasms about modern methods of education, when Peter produced from a cupboard a bound volume of simply-set arrangements for the piano of old English airs, and asked whether she could read them.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Saying modestly that she would try, Nannie sat down to the instrument, which was none of the best, and played the old-world melodies with so much taste and charm that even Miss Pemberton was disarmed, and it was with genuine kindness that she kissed Nannie's forehead when, after prayers, she saw a tired look on the girl's face, and suggested that she should go to bed.

As for Peter, her conquest of him was complete. He said very little in answer to his aunt's comments on the guest, on her having very little to say for herself, on her smallness of stature, and on her ridiculous affectation of being pleased with everything. But when he was left by himself in the little old-fashioned room he sat for a long time looking at the chair in which the girl had sat, picturing her sunny face with its electric smile, and asking himself whether Nannie Ince had for others, as she had for him, an aureole of girlish attractiveness that made her enchanting.

Certainly she had produced no electric effect upon Miss Pemberton, but Peter was inclined to think she didn't count.

On the following morning, at breakfast-time, Nannie Ince was more effusive in her admiration of her surroundings than ever, and Peter quite dreaded the effect upon his aunt of the girl's genuine delight in the ancient city, and particularly in a very old timber-framed house a little way down the street, on the opposite side, the gables of which could be seen from the Pembertons' windows.

She was most anxious to go out and inspect the house more closely ; and Miss Pemberton, who thought her

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

alert interest overdone and absurd, promised to take her for a walk as far as the cathedral as soon as her household duties were ended. Peter, as he looked at the bright young face, which he thought daylight made prettier than ever, wished he dared to offer himself as an escort, but of course that was out of the question.

It was Saturday, and a busy morning ; Nannie, who begged to be allowed to help her hostess, was quite content to wait till the afternoon, and at luncheon Peter said that he would try to go with them if they would wait till half-past three.

So the ladies put on their hats soon after three, and went into the office to see whether he was ready to escort them.

It was Nannie's first introduction to that rather austere and dull-looking apartment, but she spied the little greenhouse in the garden from the back window, and was much interested in it.

Peter had come with her to the inner end of the room, where behind a partition which cut off about one-third of the room for him and his big desk, he passed his days. He had just promised Nannie to show her his flowers, when Miss Pemberton's voice, speaking in tones of great alarm, interrupted him from the other side of the partition.

" Good gracious, Peter, here's Lord Thanington ! Come, Anne."

And before Nannie exactly understood what was the matter, Miss Pemberton had seized her by the arm, and was dragging her across the passage into the dining-room, when the front door opened, and a tall gentleman,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

with white hair and mustache, wearing a single eyeglass, almost ran into them.

"Good morning, Miss Pemberton," said he, as he raised his hat, with a glance at Nannie, just as her hostess succeeded in pushing her into the room.

"Good morning, my lord," said Miss Pemberton, much disturbed by this trifling incident, for she thought the earl would look upon it as somewhat unbecoming the dignity of the legal precincts.

"Is Pemberton in? I want to see him."

The good lady hastened to assure him that her nephew was in his office, and discreetly disappeared into the little dining-room, where Nannie was sitting in the armchair, from which she was able to see, through the wire blind, the mail phaeton standing at the door. Miss Pemberton was flushed and vexed.

"The idea of his lordship catching us like that!" said she, her face wrinkled with annoyance.

Nannie said nothing. She could not see that anything very dreadful had happened, so all she could do was to try to look appropriately sympathetic. Then she ventured to admire the horses attached to the phaeton.

"Of course they're handsome. Everything Lord Thanington has is of the best," said Miss Pemberton, rather sharply.

"And what a nice face the other man has—his friend, I suppose?" ventured the girl.

But this was an unfortunate remark. Miss Pemberton pursed her lips and remarked icily that that was Mr. Shirley Brede, and that she saw nothing particularly nice about *him*. And she advised Nannie to "sit further away from the fire in her outdoor things,"

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

which entailed the cutting off of the young girl's view of the handsome, well-dressed man waiting in the phaeton.

"There," she presently said below her breath, with excitement, "his lordship's going out."

The door of the office had indeed opened, but Lord Thanington, expressing his intention of paying his respects to Miss Pemberton, came across the passage to the dining-room, the door of which Peter threw open for him, and sat for some minutes talking to the two ladies, "a thing," as Miss Pemberton innocently remarked when he had taken his leave, "which he had never done before."

As Peter stood at the front door with his distinguished client, the latter said with a sly smile :

"Going to get married, eh, Pemberton?"

Peter blushed not red, but a purplish tint.

"Oh, no, no, my lord," he said nervously.

"Why not, eh?" and the earl turned to face him squarely, and spoke with a certain emphasis. "It's better for a business man to be married—much better," and he gave the young solicitor a nod of meaning. "Take my tip," he added, as he got into the phaeton and drove off.

CHAPTER III.

PETER PEMBERTON'S face had not yet got back to its usual pallor when he returned to the sitting-room. Miss Pemberton was still in a flutter of excitement over the earl's visit.

"He came on business, didn't he?" Peter nodded. "And it's the first time he's been here since your father's death. I thought he'd given us up altogether," said she in a tone of great satisfaction.

"Yes. I was very glad to see him," said Peter, slowly. "He gave me some advice." He paused a little, and then, in answer to her inquiring look, went on: "He seems to think I should do better to establish myself in rather more commodious premises."

Miss Pemberton's face fell.

"I'm afraid I can't agree with him," she said with some asperity. "It's always dangerous, so I've heard, for any old-established business to make a change of that sort. Your father held an excellent position, and nobody thought of complaining that the place was small."

"I'm only telling you what Lord Thanington said," said Peter. "He seemed to imply that, with a change of person, the right time had come for a change of place. I confess I've sometimes thought so myself. But it's so

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

easy to go on in the old groove, and so difficult to get out of it."

His aunt would have had some more to say about these dangerous, new-fangled doctrines if Hannah had not come in and asked her to see a man who had come from one of the outlying farms with some eggs and vegetables.

For a few minutes, for the first time since Nannie's arrival, she and Peter were left alone together. He looked at the door as he suddenly allowed his face to relax into an expression of amusement.

"I confess," said he, "that I felt heartily thankful that the remains of the turkey had saved us, on this particular occasion, from the delicate aroma of the mutton."

Nannie burst out into joyous, irrepressible laughter.

"I thought of that too," she admitted, with a blush, "and I was afraid of laughing before Miss Pemberton."

And with a comical consciousness that they were both rather in awe of that good lady, the young people fell to laughing again in a subdued and almost guilty manner.

"Lord Thanington gave me some more advice," said Peter, presently, in a lower voice, "but I don't dare to repeat that to my aunt, for fear Lord Thanington should lose her good opinion forever."

"Why, what was that?" asked Nannie, innocently, seeing that he appeared to invite the question.

"Oh, he advised me to get married," said Peter, conscious that he was blushing in his turn, but in a much more unbecoming manner than Nannie had done.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

But the young girl laughed with frank amusement, and said :

“Of course Miss Pemberton wouldn’t like that, would she?”

“No, I suppose not,” said he. “But I certainly shouldn’t feel bound to remain a bachelor all my life on her account, if I wanted to get married.”

“Oh, no, of course not. But it seems a strange thing for a man to have to get married without wishing to himself. Of course,” she added, with a sudden unconscious lapse into seriousness, “girls often have to.”

Something, some thought, passing rapidly through his mind caused Peter to take these words even more seriously than Nannie had said them.

“Yes, I suppose so,” he said, so shortly that the girl glanced up shyly, rather afraid of having said something that offended.

And when Miss Pemberton came back into the room, as she did a moment later, she felt as much surprise and suspicion at the sober look on both their faces as she had felt, a few moments before, on hearing their outburst of laughter.

By the time they all got out into the street dusk was already coming on. But there was light enough left for Nannie to see the old house, the distant view of which had so greatly taken her fancy, and for her to see, too, that there was a printed bill on an unused gate at the side, announcing the fact that the premises were to be offered for sale by auction at an early date.

“Oh, I wish I could buy it!” cried Nannie, with thoughtless girlish admiration, as she stood back, after reading the bill, to feast her eyes on the overhanging

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

upper floor, the wide windows with their tiny, fancifully arranged panes, the three sharp gables above, the ancient wooden door below.

An interesting house it was, undoubtedly, one of the most picturesque and ancient of all the dwellings in the ancient and picturesque city. The front, which could be hardly less than four hundred years old, although the introduced Elizabethan windows were of rather later date, was some sixty feet in length. This frontage included a wooden gate, permanently closed, under a rough archway, above which the house itself extended. This entrance, now no longer used, suggested that the house had suffered changes in the course of its history, and that it might formerly have been an inn. Seen in a better light, dirty curtains and other indications of neglect would have shown that the poor old house was not at present in hands to make the most of its good points. But in the dusk these details escaped notice; and to a romantic girl the gabled old house, with its irregular lines, was a sort of fairy palace.

Peter was amused and interested by her enthusiasm.

"Think how beautiful it would be to live in such a house!" cried she. "How one would sit and wonder what had happened in the old rooms, how the people were dressed who lived there first, and whether they were happy or miserable!"

Miss Pemberton promptly put a wet blanket on what she looked upon as profitless and absurd speculations.

"I can't see the use of wasting one's time in idle thoughts of that kind," she said, not unkindly, but with the frank conviction of mature good sense. "Of course they were sometimes happy and sometimes miserable,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

just like anybody else. And as for their dress, whatever it was like, of course they thought nothing of it themselves because they were used to it."

"Yes," said Nannie, laughing, too happy and too much interested to be easily repressed, "of course people who lived in the olden time lost the best part of it by not knowing it *was* the Olden Time!"

At that Miss Pemberton laughed a little too, but it was with contempt rather than with amusement.

"How ridiculous!" said she.

Meanwhile Peter said very little, but he followed the girl's eyes, and then went up to the bill on the door and read the contents carefully.

"Would you like to go over it—on Monday, I mean, by daylight?" he asked Nannie.

The girl's eyes sparkled.

"Oh, yes, indeed I should! But I—I shouldn't like to, as I'm not going to buy it," she added, laughing.

"Well, they needn't know that, need they?" said Peter, laughing back. "Inspect everything very carefully, measure the distance between the fireplaces and the wall, and talk loudly about your mother's fear of draughts."

And then both of them, led by the girl, went off into a fresh explosion of that apparently causeless merriment which annoyed Miss Pemberton so much.

Then they went on towards the cathedral, Nannie finding fresh beauties every step of the way. The grand old west gate, which had not long since been the prison, filled her with ecstasy. The quaint old buildings in the High Street beyond kept her at a fever heat of enthusiasm, and when at last, after threading their way

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

through a narrow lane famous for its rats, they passed under the crumbling gateway into the Close, and came within the spell of those famous old walls that seem to be steeped in the history of the past, her feelings found a climax which made her silent. And as they stole into the big nave, where the people were walking softly on tiptoe, listening to the last notes of the organ at the close of the afternoon service, Peter saw that her dark eyes were moist, and that an expression of most sweet gravity had come over her features.

Even her comments on the cathedral, however, failed to satisfy Miss Pemberton's fastidious taste. She complained to Peter, when she and her nephew were alone together for a few minutes that night, that the girl was not really religious, "only emotional," and expressed the fear that she would have felt much the same in a Roman Catholic church as she had done in the cathedral that afternoon.

Peter, who thought his aunt's judgment much too severe, diplomatically kept his tone cool as he suggested that one would expect a young girl's religion to be emotional.

"She's a very accommodating guest, isn't she?" he went on. "I heard her offering to help you about the house."

Miss Pemberton laughed shortly.

"She isn't much use in a house, though," said she, grimly. "And she very soon got tired even of such assistance as she gave."

"It was amiable of her to offer it, at any rate," said Peter, rather nettled by this persistent depreciation.

"Yes. But there's no excuse for a girl whose

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

parents are poor not knowing how to turn the sheet over the bolster in making a bed. It shows that her readiness to help is only put on for show, and that she's never been of the least use at home."

"You're much too severe, aunt," said Peter, somewhat more sharply than usual. "You don't know what her duties may have been at home. Perhaps, being the youngest, she was a little spoilt."

"She had no business to be!" retorted Miss Pemberton, with heat.

Peter was too much irritated to trust himself to say more. But on the following day, at dinner-time, he surprised Nannie by asking her a string of questions, in his turn, about her occupations at home. Innocently, openly, Nannie replied to them all, with the result that Miss Pemberton discovered what Peter had shrewdly guessed—that Nannie had taken her fair share of the home duties, having been her father's amanuensis, as well as an active helper in the work with the church choir.

"We got on beautifully at home," added poor Nannie, with the ready tears in her eyes, "because we all liked different things. May helped in the house—and she can cook beautifully; she's taken lessons. And Lilian got through an immense quantity of needlework; while I always helped papa."

Her voice broke a little, and she bit her lip. She had been passionately fond of her father; and although her buoyant youth had quickly recovered from the blow of his loss, she could not yet make any reference to him without a deep pang.

Nannie had excited a certain amount of attention at

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

church that morning, and in the course of the following week Miss Pemberton received a good many calls from acquaintances who had felt interested in the young stranger in deep mourning in the Pembertons' pew.

Some of these acquaintances being ladies of standing in the small but severely "select" upper stratum of Bredinsbury society, Miss Pemberton was divided between satisfaction at receiving their visits and annoyance that Nannie should be the cause of them.

She would have kept the fact secret that these welcome attentions were anything out of the common, but Peter, simple soul ! betrayed their sensational character by exclaiming loudly whenever he heard that Mrs. This or Lady That had "dropped in"—that was Miss Pemberton's phrase—in the course of the afternoon.

Luckily, Nannie herself appeared unconscious that she was the object of all this attention ; but Peter was amused and touched by her grateful pleasure, which she expressed ingenuously when the three were alone together, at the kindness she received from the local ladies.

After this there came a fresh development.

The young men of the neighborhood, who had not cultivated the society of the Pembertons to any great extent previously to Nannie's arrival, began to find the little house in St. Dunstan's a charming place to spend part of their evenings in. They always came, in the first place, with a message for Peter, or to ask his advice upon some trivial point or other upon which he was not qualified to give an opinion ; and then they would instantly avail themselves of half a perfunctory invitation to stay, and would be obliging enough to sing

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

to Nannie's accompaniment, or to play chess (which he hated) with Peter, or to talk about cricket with Miss Pemberton, who understood little and cared less about innings and overs, and who thought that "Ranji" was the name of a yacht.

There was one good side, so Miss Pemberton thought, to all this fuss about a little bit of a girl with next to nothing to say for herself. Nannie's attention was thus diverted from Peter, who was, his aunt suspected, unduly susceptible to such attractions as the owner of the commonplace face and snub nose possessed.

One young man, indeed, the son of one of the Church dignitaries who swarmed in the little city, was so delighted to find in Nannie a capable and good-natured accompanist that he brought his violin to St. Dunstan's two or three times a week, and showed an unmistakable pleasure in her society, which Nannie appeared to reciprocate.

And at last Miss Pemberton remarked upon this circumstance to her nephew, adding that it would be an odd thing if they really did succeed in marrying one of poor Marion's girls, as Peter had once suggested they might try to do. She watched her nephew as she made this suggestion, but he gave no sign.

That same day, however, he found an opportunity of speaking to the young girl alone, and said to her :

"You'll miss young Stowe's visits when you go back to Preston, won't you?"

Nannie replied quite frankly :

"I shall miss everybody here, I'm afraid ; but not Mr. Stowe more than the rest."

"More than you will—me, I'm afraid?" Peter

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

went on, trying to hide a certain agitation he felt under a light tone and a smile, as he bit one end of his mustache nervously and gave her a sidelong look.

He was considerably reassured by the promptness and energy of her reply to this.

"I sha'n't miss anybody so much as I shall you,"—and after a second's pause she added, with less emphasis—"and Miss Pemberton." She went to the window quickly, and, before he could make use of what he felt to be a promising opening, went on, "I shall never forget how kind you've both been to me—how kind it was of you to have me—as long as I live."

And then she ran out of the room, leaving Peter uncertain whether to be elated by her words or depressed by something in her tone which intimated that she did not quite understand the nature of his feelings towards her.

The month during which her visit was to last was drawing to an end, when Lord Thanington called again at the little house in St. Dunstan's, and for the second time insisted on paying his respects, as he called it, to the ladies before leaving.

On this occasion he was very anxious that they should take tickets for a concert at the Town Hall, at which a young French violinist, in whom he and his daughter took an interest, was to make his appearance.

"You, I think, Miss Ince, would be specially interested," the earl went on, "as I hear you are an accomplished musician."

"Oh, no, not that," said Nannie, blushing. "I wish I were. And I couldn't go to the concert, because——"

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

She stopped, and the ready tears welled up. Miss Pemberton helped her out.

"Anne is in mourning for her father," she murmured quickly.

But Lord Thanington said promptly :

"But there would be no impropriety in her attending this concert. It's the quietest affair possible ; and people don't count morning concerts as gayeties. It would be odd if they did."

"But I shall be gone back home before then," said Nannie.

"Miss Pemberton must persuade you to stay for it," said Lord Thanington, imperturbably.

And when he went away he had obtained the promise of both ladies to be present at the concert.

Nannie felt a sort of guiltiness, as if she had been made to obtrude her presence longer than it was wanted ; for she had for some days dimly perceived, by her hostess's constant references to her approaching departure, that this would be looked upon as a welcome event.

However, she could say very little, since it was clear that Lord Thanington's wishes were looked upon as laws. Peter openly rejoiced in the arrangement as prolonging Nannie's visit ; and the girl gave him a grateful glance, through rather dim eyes, when he thus consoled her for Miss Pemberton's coolness by his own warmth.

She could not help liking this good, quiet Peter, with his constant kindness, and the quick look of sympathy he would shoot across the table at her when his aunt said something which jarred a little.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

When the day of the concert came, Nannie and Miss Pemberton duly attended the function, and found themselves seated not far from the earl's party. Lord Thanington was there himself, and so was his unmarried daughter, Lady Joanna—a woman of thirty-five or so, of a type common in the English upper and upper-middle class ; tall, thin, upright, slightly aquiline of feature, frank, unaffected, and totally without grace or charm ; she spoke in a high-pitched voice, greeted friends and strangers alike without a smile, did her duty strictly as she conceived it, and looked upon herself and her “set” as the salt of the earth.

There were also one or two beautifully-dressed women, with suspiciously artistic complexions. And there were half a dozen more or less good-looking Englishmen of various ages in attendance, conspicuous among whom was the handsome and attractive Shirley Brede.

The whole party was rather noisy, and would have been reckoned ill-behaved if they had not been known to be from Greyfriars, the earl's place a few miles away. The men all took careful note of Nannie ; and when, in the interval, Lord Thanington introduced the young girl to his daughter and the rest, she found herself the object of a good deal of flattering attention.

Lady Joanna, who looked upon spinsters older than herself with abhorrence, had only once spoken to Miss Pemberton before. Now, however, she took the trouble to leave her own seat to say to that good lady :

“ Who is the little girl ? If she really is, as they say, only a poor curate's daughter, I think you had better send her home as soon as possible, or she'll get her head turned.”

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

“And I’m sure I can’t think what they all see in her,” retorted Miss Pemberton, with acerbity. “Feature for feature, there’s hardly a girl in Bredinsbury who isn’t better-looking.”

Lady Joanna smiled rather acidly.

“Men don’t trouble their heads about features,” said she, with conviction, “They like a round young face and a fresh color. It’s for the girl’s own good I advise you to pack her off as quickly as you can.”

And both ladies, turning their heads, saw that Shirley Brede was bending his handsome head close to Nannie’s, to write some notes, with obliging kindness, on the margin of her program.

CHAPTER IV.

MISS PEMBERTON stared at the group of which Nannie Ince formed the center with a slight frown of perplexity and disapproval on her face. She did not profess to understand all the moods and whims of that great and gay world of which the Greyfriars' party formed a part. It seemed to her inexplicable that these good-looking, well-turned-out men, of whom she felt some secret awe and shuddering admiration, should neglect the smart ladies of their own set to cluster round her own dowdily-dressed little *protégée* "with the round red cheeks and the snub nose."

It was rather strange, perhaps, that Miss Pemberton, who was shocked at the use of face powder, should not have thought well of the taste of these men in paying more attention to the little girl whose face was as Nature made it than to the painted beauties of their own "set." But, such is the force of convention, Miss Pemberton instinctively forgave in the friends of the great Lord Thanington what she would have been the first to condemn in women of lower degree. The beautifully-dressed ladies in their little sable coats with ermine lapels, their big black hats with flashing jet buckles and long drooping feathers, their long fine chains, each with a gold purse or a bunch of jeweled charms dangling from it, in truth possessed for the prim, elderly lady a sort of grim fascination: she felt

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

that the Biblical Delilah must have been of this order of women, must have had roving eyes and little restless movements of the head and hands, and pretty, imperious yet easy-going ways, like the feminine members of that lively group which attracted so much attention.

These ladies were the proper companions of those handsome, well-dressed men. It was an unaccountable freak, surely, that made them bestow so much as a glance upon plain Nannie.

The good spinster, dear, simple soul, appreciated but dimly the charm of Nannie's fresh youth, of her glowing, whole-hearted enjoyment of things. With a sigh she decided that it was a perverse love of change which made the notoriously wicked Shirley Brede and the *blasé* Lord Thanington turn for the moment from the women of their own set to speak to the little girl in dowdy black.

And even as she thought this, Miss Pemberton saw the earl himself drop into the unoccupied seat by Nannie.

Before the interval was over, Nannie would have come back to her seat by Miss Pemberton, but was prevented by her new companions ; so that she spent the rest of the afternoon with these grand new acquaintances, whose audible whispers, indeed, and slightly restless behavior, would have been considered shocking in other people. Nannie herself was rather scandalized by their bored attitude towards the promising violinist, and took care to maintain, for her own part, an attitude of rigid attention, only replying by a little nod or by the faintest of whispers to the flippant criticisms with which they tried to upset her gravity.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"You like music?" asked Lord Thanington of Nannie as they all rose when the performance was over, applauding with exemplary vigor the performer to whom they had scarcely listened.

"Oh, yes, I love it!" cried the girl, enthusiastically.

Lord Thanington raised those bushy black eyebrows which were in such vivid contrast with his almost silver hair, and smiled down at her from the height of six feet two to five feet and very little over.

"That music?"

"All music, I think," answered Nannie, after a second's consideration.

The earl laughed a little.

"Ah, to be as young as that! to enjoy everything!" said he, kindly; "and it's the same with everything, I suppose? You never go to the theater without enjoying yourself, I'm sure? And even a dinner-party wouldn't seem to you dull?"

"I'm sure it wouldn't," said Nannie, brightly. "As for the theater, I've hardly ever been to one, but when I have, it's quite true that I've always enjoyed myself immensely."

Shirley Brede was standing beside the earl and listening to Nannie too. He was a shorter man than Lord Thanington, but was usually considered a much handsomer one. The lower jaw, protruding slightly, gave the necessary touch of masculinity to features which might otherwise have been called effeminate; while his laughing blue eyes gave him a look of almost boyish good-humor which was a well-known and irresistible charm of his.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Fancy enjoying oneself immensely at any theater and over any piece," murmured Lord Thanington, as he still looked at Nannie, and made her blush a little and wonder if her frankness had not made her appear rather foolish in his eyes. "What do you say to that, Brede?"

"I say that she ought to give us lessons!" said Shirley, with a wonderful mock gravity, while his eyes danced. "If Miss Ince can teach us the trick of enjoying oneself in sitting out one in ten of the pieces they put on in London theaters, she'll deserve the biggest gold medal that ever was struck."

Nannie laughed a little, conscious that they thought her very simple.

"Oh, of course, I know that I should enjoy them because I don't know any better," she said modestly, as they all slowly moved towards the doors with the crowd.

"No, Miss Ince. It's that we know worse," said Lord Thanington.

"Still, I think we might perhaps catch some of Miss Ince's optimism if she would undertake our education," suggested Shirley Brede with a merry look at Nannie, who blushed again and smiled again, but said nothing to this.

"Certainly I think if I were to see a piece in the company of Miss Ince I shouldn't find it dull," said the earl.

And Nannie looked up at him and frankly smiled her thanks for the little compliment.

Altogether she felt that she was having a delightful afternoon, and when Lord Thanington and the rest of

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

the party got into their carriages and drove away, Nannie wished that he would really carry out a suggestion he had made, that he should send Lady Joanna round to St. Dunstan's one morning to carry her back to Greyfriars to lunch.

Nannie was still beaming when she and Miss Pemberton were half-way down the street on their way home. The young girl had wit enough to know that her companion was highly displeased, and she supposed it was on account of her having retained her seat among the Greyfriars people for the second half of the concert. She began her apologies at once.

"I am so very sorry, Miss Pemberton, that I couldn't get back to you before the interval was over. They wouldn't let me come between the pieces, and when the music had begun again I didn't like to."

Miss Pemberton replied with that little preliminary sound, best described as a snort, with which ladies of mature age are apt to express displeasure against the younger and fairer of their own sex.

"Oh, don't mention that, child. When I hear really good music I don't care to talk. I shouldn't have minded that a bit, except that I didn't care to see you making yourself ridiculous. Not that that mattered, of course, if you didn't mind, except that Lord Thannington's a client of Peter's, so that, of course, as you're staying with us, I might have preferred to see you behave like other people. But it's of no consequence, and now it's over, and no doubt they'll soon forget it."

Nannie grew rather alarmed—not, indeed, so much alarmed as Miss Pemberton would have liked to see her, for she was human enough to feel a dim conscious-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

ness of where her fault lay ; but she was just sensible enough of her own inexperience and possible awkwardness not to feel quite easy under this sharp rebuke.

There was a little silence before the girl said humbly :

“ I know I’m shy and ignorant, and not used to such grand people as they are. But don’t you think they know that and make allowances for it ? I hope I didn’t do or say anything to make you ashamed of me. And Lord Thanington is so kind that I’m sure he——”

“ What did Lord Thanington say to you ? ” interrupted Miss Pemberton, turning to her sharply.

Nannie was rather taken aback with the abruptness by which the question was put ; and when she stammered Miss Pemberton glared at her with something like ferocity, so that she stammered still more as she answered :

“ Oh, he—he asked me if I liked music, and—and he said it must be nice to be young enough to like everything, and——”

“ Oh, I see. Laughing at you, of course ! ”

“ Well, I didn’t mind Lord Thanington’s laughing at me, he did it in such a nice way.”

Miss Pemberton appeared to be aghast at this confession.

“ Lady Joanna’s quite right,” she said shortly. “ Your head would very soon be turned.”

Perhaps it was the sharp contrast between Miss Pemberton’s acerbity and the pleasant flatteries of her late companions that suddenly caused Nannie to feel a lump in her throat, and to find the tears rising to her eyes.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Oh, well, it will soon be turned round the proper way again," she said, with a touch of bitterness and resentment which the elder lady had not heard in her voice before.

"What do you mean?" she asked sharply.

But Nannie had already put a curb upon herself, and she answered gravely and quietly, "Well, when I'm back at Preston again, teaching music and things in the morning, and helping mama in the afternoon, I shan't have much time to waste and to think—to think silly things. And I suppose that's what you mean by 'having my head turned.'"

Miss Pemberton mumbled something in answer, but the words were not quite clear. Fortunately they had got to the house door, so the rather unhappy little colloquy came to a natural end.

But Nannie found herself dreading what Miss Pemberton would say before Peter at tea-time.

Luckily, as it seemed to the girl, an incident occurred that turned the conversation at once into a different channel. The ladies came into the dining-room together, and found Peter sitting in an armchair by the fire with a small pamphlet in his hand. He jumped up on their entrance and asked them how they had enjoyed their afternoon. While Nannie answered rather demurely, with her eye on Miss Pemberton, that it was "very nice," the elder lady picked up the paper which Peter had laid upon the table.

It was the description of the old house with the three gables, with the conditions of sale.

"Oh!" she cried, "why, this was the day of the sale! And we never went over it after all!"

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Nannie said nothing, but Peter saw, as he watched her, that a look of disappointment came over her sunny little face.

"No," said he. "I thought you had both forgotten all about it."

"I hadn't," said Nannie. "I suppose it's too late to see over it now."

Peter was pulling his mustache, and the hand with which he did so was shaking quite perceptibly. Miss Pemberton alone noticed this, and presently asked :

"Was the house sold, do you know ?"

"Yes, it was."

Nannie, who was looking at the paper in her turn, looked up, struck by a slight difference in his voice. Miss Pemberton spoke again, with quite a sharp rise in her voice.

"And who bought it ?"

Perhaps some instinct of divination had seized her, for she exhibited no surprise when he answered simply :

"I did."

But Nannie was amazed. She looked up at the distinguished owner of the picturesque house with a face full of light and color.

"You ! Really ! *You*, Mr. Peter ! Oh, then we *can* go over it, and without having to pretend we want to buy it !" cried she, laughing. And then she added ingenuously, almost in the same breath, "Oh, what a nice day this has been ! Two lovely things in it !"

Then she stopped short, glancing at Miss Pemberton, and reddening with the consciousness that that lady was looking upon her outburst as too effusive.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Peter, however, smiled with his usual comforting good-nature.

"Ah! Then that settles it: you did enjoy yourself, I see!"

"Yes," said Nannie, as she turned at once sedately to Miss Pemberton. "He played beautifully, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes, the music was good, of course," said that lady, not however with quite so much acidity as she would have shown but for that intervening incident. For the discovery that her nephew had had the spirit to buy the old house without a word to her of his intention was fraught with meaning to the astute spinster. "Was there much competition for the house?" she asked, keenly anxious to know the price he had paid for his bargain.

"Not much," said he. "I think there was only one other genuine bidder, apart from Thompson, the agent, who would have bought it, I suppose, if it had been going very cheap."

"Then—then you paid a good deal for it?"

"Not more than I was prepared to pay," said Peter; and instinctively he shot another furtive glance at Nannie, who had by this time seated herself in the arm-chair he offered her, and begun to play with the cat.

Miss Pemberton relapsed into silence; but a keen observer might have detected a little moisture in her eyes as she seated herself at the table and began to pour out the tea. She felt that her presidency over that teapot was threatened. Nannie, all innocent of the hopes and fears in her two companions, and still under the spell of a pleasant experience, looked pensively at the

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

fire when she had taken her usual seat at the homely tea-table. Peter, who sat next to her, and opposite to his aunt, said, in a rather husky and subdued voice, as he took his place at the table in his turn :

“ Well, did you speak to any of the people from Greyfriars ? ”

Nannie blushed very red, and looked at Miss Pemberton again as she replied hastily, “ Oh, yes, to a—to all of them, I think.”

“ Anne sat with them part of the time,” explained Miss Pemberton, solemnly, and, as both the others felt, portentously.

“ Lord Thanington took me over to be introduced to—to his daughter, and—and the other ladies,” went on Nannie, almost pleadingly.

“ And did you like them ? They’re all very lively, and very smart, aren’t they ? ” said Peter, quickly, perceiving that there had been some friction on this subject, and probably making a shrewd guess as to its nature.

“ Oh, yes, and they were very kind to me, all of them.”

“ Did you like Lady Joanna ! I can’t bear that woman myself,” said Peter.

Both his aunt and Nannie looked rather shocked, for even the young visitor had fallen into the habit of the cult of the Greyfriars’ “ set.”

Peter explained boldly. “ She has no charm, and I hate a woman without charm.”

“ What do you mean by ‘ charm ’ ? ” asked his aunt, rather indignantly. “ Lady Joanna is a most sensible and high-principled woman, and full of good sense.”

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Oh, yes, I suppose she is. But sense and charm don't always go together, you know," persisted Peter, who seemed to be under the spell of one of those fits of outspokenness he had sometimes been subject to of late. "It's odd that she should be without it, too, when her father has it so strongly. Don't you think he is what you ladies call a charming man, Miss Nannie?"

"I shouldn't ask such questions if I were you," put in Miss Pemberton. "Everybody knows the earl is a nice man, but after all, such people are to be admired at a distance, and not considered as we consider our own friends."

"Still, you do like him, don't you?" persisted Peter, who was unusually headstrong to-night.

"Indeed I do. I think he and Mr. Brede are the two nicest men I have ever met," said Nannie, earnestly, and without at once perceiving how her speech could be used against her.

Miss Pemberton pointed out her mistake by a little laugh, and Peter smiled at her as she bit her lip.

"You should say 'present company excepted,'" said he, meeting her eyes with that kind, consoling look she knew so well and valued so much in these little domestic tribulations.

Nannie laughed softly.

"Oh, I don't count you, Mr. Peter. Of course you're nicer than anybody!" she cried impulsively, and with such evident sincerity that it was honest Peter's turn to blush.

Indeed, he was so much moved that he became suddenly restless, and rising quickly from his chair, said, as he began to poke the fire, which stood in no need of

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

his attention, "After that pretty speech there's only one thing to be done. I shall take you over this very evening to inspect my new property."

Miss Pemberton said nothing ; she just threw him an anxious glance, stared at Nannie as if not knowing what to make of her apparent innocence, and then dropped her eyelids discreetly.

Nannie was delighted.

"Oh, will you ? Will you really ? But we shan't be able to see, shall we ?"

"We'll see something, and we'll imagine mysteries in the dark corners," said Peter, who was still restless, and husky of voice, and unlike himself. "I'll take a lantern, and my aunt will give you a packet of candles."

One more look up from Miss Pemberton, who now understood that she was not to be included in the party, and then she became submissive and promised anything he wanted. Nannie was brimming over with delight and excitement, which, however, she kept to a proper pitch of restraint until she had run up-stairs and come down again in her hat and jacket, struggling with her gloves.

"Never mind your gloves," said Peter, who was standing in the narrow hall, wrapped in his shabby old second-best overcoat, with his soft brownish hat in one hand and his lantern in the other. "You can tuck one of your hands under my arm and put the other in your pocket."

"All right," laughed Nannie, as they ran down the steps.

She did notice a new and bolder manner than usual in Peter as he took her hand in quite a fatherly manner

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

and drew it into his arm. But she, heart-whole and excited with pleasure, did not perceive with what tremulous delight he did this daring thing, nor understand the sensations which surged through the young man's frame as the girl almost danced along beside him.

"It seems quite like an adventure, doesn't it?" laughed she. "Only I can't enjoy it as much as I ought, because I'm so afraid of dropping the candles out of the paper. Fancy what people who knew you would think if they came behind us just as I had been strewing the pavement with short sixes!"

Peter threw back his head and laughed uproariously, while she chuckled in delighted appreciation of his enjoyment of her little joke. He was always like that, ready to laugh out and share in her easy girlish mirth, especially when Miss Pemberton was not present.

When they got under the black shadow of the old house, the upper floors of which hung over the pavement in irregular lines, Peter had to drop her hand and to fumble for the key. And then he had to fumble for the lock, while she held the lantern for him to see by.

"Isn't it grand to feel yourself owner and landlord of a beautiful old house like this?" whispered Nannie, her dancing eyes meeting his steadier gray ones. "I can see it is! You're quite excited about it, aren't you?"

Peter laughed rather shyly.

"I suppose I am," said he.

And the old door creaked and opened under his hand, and before them they saw the dim recesses of a long, dark hall, narrow at the beginning, but opening out into grim depths of blackness, with a strong smell of

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

bass and the straw of packing cases greeting them and filling them, at the outset, with a sudden sense of the loneliness of a recent departure.

And their footsteps echoed and reechoed in unseen nooks and doorways as they entered the ancient house.

CHAPTER V.

"Now, be careful," said Peter, warningly, as Nannie went quickly in. "The place hasn't been cleared up since the people went away, and you might trip over some of the lumber that's left about. It's very dirty, too, and I won't answer for it that there mayn't be rats."

At the last warning Nannie said "Oh!" and restrained her steps. Peter shut the front door and opened a door on the right.

"Come in here," said he, and there was a pleasant note of friendly protection in his tone, foreshadowing his hopes, if she had but known it. "I want to show you something you'll like."

Nannie followed him into a room of fair size, with a low ceiling and paneled walls. On one side was the old fireplace, into which a modern grate had been fitted; on the other a wide bow window, filled with picturesque leaded panes and with a long window-seat, overlooked the street. Grimy, neglected as the whole place looked, these features filled Nannie with admiration and delight.

At the end of the room a second door led into another and smaller apartment, and Peter explained to her that he proposed throwing the two rooms together by

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

pulling down a lath and plaster partition, which was only a recent erection. Entering heartily into his schemes, Nannie found herself in perfect agreement with him on all points of taste, such as the scraping off of the dirty paint which covered the paneling and staining it dark brown.

"You'll want a lot more furniture than you've got in your present house," said Nannie, suddenly.

"Yes. What I thought of doing was to have everything new for it," said Peter, with a shy look, his voice still a little husky.

"Oh!" said Nannie, impressed. "And now that you can get such pretty things—armchairs with wings, and tall grandfather clocks, and high-backed settles—you'll be able to make it *so* pretty!"

Peter, standing close to her, holding the flickering lantern rather high, so that he could see her face, answered with enthusiasm:

"Yes, yes, I like all those things. We—I——" he broke off suddenly, and walking abruptly to the door, said, "Come and see the rest."

There was a small room on the opposite side of the entrance-hall, which, they both decided, would make a perfect library.

"I've got a few books of my father's, four or five hundred, rather dry inside, but serious and respectable-looking to the eye," explained Peter. "It would be cosy to sit here in the winter evenings and—and look at them, wouldn't it?"

Nannie laughed and they left the little room to make further explorations.

The house, which had a large modern addition at the

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

back to its ancient front, offered most curious architectural developments. Thus, a long and narrow entrance-hall led into a wide, square inner hall of imposing size, with a carved Elizabethan staircase in one corner. This came in for a great deal of admiration, and at the top of the staircase a long and lofty modern room, with a French window leading, by a flight of stone steps, into the garden, came as a surprise to Nannie.

"This I should make the dining-room," said Peter. "Don't you think so? It would be grand, wouldn't it, to keep the smell of mutton forever to the back of the house?"

And Nannie agreed, amid laughter from both of them.

"I am afraid you can't see much of the garden in the dark," said Peter, as he opened the window and led the way on to the steps. "But it's really charming, with a thick yew hedge eight or nine feet high shutting in a little lawn at this end. And beyond that there's a grand kitchen garden, getting on for an acre altogether, with lots of fruit trees and gooseberry bushes and things, and a little glass at the end. And there are big trees all the way down one side——"

Nannie interrupted him with a little cry. She was half way down the steps, holding his hand, as he was, or affected to be, afraid that the steps might be slippery. She had caught sight of something which particularly attracted her admiration—two of those big round stone balls, so common on ancient gate-posts, which adorned the entrance to a small courtyard at the back of the house.

"Well," she said at last, when they had picked their

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

way carefully, by the help of the lantern, through the box borders, and duly admired the gaunt and bare pear trees holding stiff black arms up towards the night sky, "I don't think even Miss Pemberton could be cross with me for admiring this place! Do you think she could?"

At the mention of his aunt's name, however, poor Peter's honest enjoyment became for a moment a little clouded.

"I don't suppose she will find as much to admire here as you and I do," said he, finding comfort in coupling Nannie's name with his own in this manner. "I think I can see her peering about, as you wouldn't do, hunting about for possible draughts, and criticising the capabilities of every grate."

They had turned back towards the house by this time. Nannie laughed.

"Ah, but remember that I need take no utilitarian interest in the place. So the picturesqueness of it is enough for me."

Now these words cast a fresh and deeper gloom over the young lawyer. He dropped behind a little and followed her up the long flight of stone steps into the house again without a word.

"Which is the way down?" asked she, at the door, seeing nothing before her in the darkness, and conscious of a sudden little estrangement.

Peter's tone was quite plaintive as he said humbly, "There are a lot more rooms to see. Won't you go over it all?"

So they went through rooms ancient and sloping of floor, and rooms modern and lofty, found a storeroom

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

where Peter said rows of apples would be laid for the winter, and a great gloomy, windowless vastness over the disused archway, which Peter declared to be a lumber-room, but where Nannie was sure the Elizabethan ghost must take a solemn walk each night.

Then they came down by the back staircase, a possession which impressed Nannie greatly, and wandered through an old-fashioned wilderness of flagged kitchen and scullery and outhouse, which made Nannie stop to say abruptly :

“ You won’t be able to manage with only Hannah here, Mr. Peter.”

“ Peter hesitated, and then answered :

“ No, I suppose not.”

“ You’ll want three servants at least,” she went on, honestly believing that her housewifely knowledge was being of real service in opening his eyes to the extent of his enterprise ; “ this is a big, beautiful house.”

Peter had grown so restless that, in order to hide his agitated movements, he had seated himself upon the edge of the copper, with one foot on the floor and the other dangling ; he hummed softly to himself, and tapped with his fingers on the top of the lantern, which was resting on the wooden lid of the copper. He just nodded an assent to her statements, and Nannie, rather puzzled, and perhaps beginning to feel uneasy, moved towards the kitchen door.

“ You know,” said Peter, in a voice which was rather tremulous, “ I told you Lord Thanington said my house was too small for me, or something to that effect. Now if I lived here, and kept the old house for an office, I should be a great swell, shouldn’t I ? And equal to

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

the position of his lordship's solicitor if it should come to that ? ”

“ Oh ! ” said Nannie, turning, “ I see. Yes, of course you would. ”

Peter got off the copper.

“ And if I took his advice, and—and got married, why, I should have a nice house for my wife, shouldn't I ? ”

She knew it now. But the truth had burst upon her like a thunder-clap. Peter was so quiet, so methodical, so self-restrained, that not until this moment had the girl understood what that restlessness, that unusual vivacity portended.

And quite suddenly her tone and manner changed ; her bright childish manner left her and she became subdued, uneasy, frightened. As her courage left her, however, Peter's came back to him.

“ Didn't you guess ? ” he said hoarsely, as he came towards her, but stopped short before he got very near. “ Didn't you know why—why I wanted this house—that—that you liked ? ”

Then he was struck for the moment dumb with horror by the misery—it amounted to nothing less—he heard in her voice as she answered :

“ Oh, don't say that, don't ! don't ! Don't say it was my fault ; indeed, I never, never guessed ! ”

Peter was thunderstruck in his turn. He was not in the least conceited, he had not counted upon so much as her encouragement, but that she should treat the idea of marrying him with downright horror was an unexpected blow. He could not quite understand it. He waited a little, and then said gently, “ You don't dislike me, do you ? ”

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

It was reassuring to find that she repelled this notion with something like indignation.

"Dislike you ! Oh, how can you ask ?"

"Then—then, if you don't dislike me, if in fact you rather like me, and if you like the house very much, why, why can't you—think it over ? I haven't known you long, I know, and so perhaps it shocks you that I should say this. But if you knew how I feel about you, you wouldn't be surprised that I must speak."

Peter felt astonished, even as he spoke, to find how brave he was and how fluently he expressed himself when he had once screwed himself up to the point.

Nannie had clasped her hands, and, still with the same scared look in her dark eyes, and with her lips slightly parted and her breath coming fast, she listened attentively to every word. When he had ended she drew a long breath, a sort of gasp, and said, in a voice full of sudden terror :

"Oh, and the expense it's put you to ! That's dreadful ! And to think it's through me—me whom you've been so kind to ! That's the worst, the terrible part of it ! It makes me feel guilty, miserable ! And you've always been so good, so kind, so *nice*, that I was always longing to do something to show you how grateful I felt !"

"Well, you could show it in the best possible way," said Peter, readily. But she shrank at the words, and he made a dash forward and held up his lantern to look into her face. "Is there anybody else ?" said he, sharply.

She looked up straight into his eyes, and said,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"No!" most heartily. Peter let his arm drop and breathed more freely.

"Come out here," said he, "and let's talk it over. I don't understand you at all."

She followed him through the big square kitchen, with the evergreens brushing gently against the window-panes in the night wind. He passed out into the square hall and made her sit on the second stair of the Elizabethan staircase. Then he fastened his lantern to the banister rail and sat down on the broad platform at the bottom of the flight, three or four feet away from her.

"Now we'll talk it out," said he.

She had quite got over her fright, that was one good thing, and now sat, with her hands lightly clasped, bending forward, ready to talk and to listen. And another pleasant discovery was that he now found himself suddenly free from all shyness, able to speak out frankly to her, and without reserve. He took off his hat and turned towards her, and the girl found herself looking at him at once from a new point of view; no longer as the sober and staid second person in the little St. Dunstan's household, her defender and sympathizer, but as a great and important personage, the owner of the beautiful old house, and the first person who had ever suggested himself to her as a possible husband.

The fact, now viewed soberly and got used to, made this young man with the grave gray eyes exceedingly interesting to her; and Nannie, in shade herself, found herself criticising his appearance in quite a new way.

The soft and dim lantern light shone on his light hair, which was thick and heavy and almost ash-colored;

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

and it struck her suddenly that in this light it looked as if it was silver with age, and that his grave, quiet face was strangely lined and furrowed for a man so young.

And then an odd thought darted through her mind. He looked older than Lord Thanington, who was sixty, and who was reported to have led the life of pleasure that ages a man before his time.

Nannie was shocked and surprised at the thought as it came into her mind ; but she could not get rid of it. It seemed so unfair that good, honest, kind Peter should look as if he had had no youth at all, and a subtle pity stole into her heart as she looked at him. But it was not the pity that is akin to love, as love is understood by a girl of eighteen, who is indeed scarcely more than a bright child, with a child's ideals, a child's caprices.

It was her extreme youthfulness of thought and feeling that made Nannie's peculiar charm, the effervescence of spirit which showed all life and human beings to her through a haze of exuberant fancies. Peter could not in fairness grumble, therefore, if it was the very fanciful, idealizing quality which charmed him which was his own downfall.

"Now," began Peter, judicially, when they were both seated, "I want you to explain to me why it is that you won't even consider—what I've said." There was a pause, and then he added quickly, "Or can't you tell me? Don't you know yourself?"

He thought, perhaps with a faint hope, it might be that he had shot the bolt too hurriedly, and that she might relent when she had had time to think it over. But Nannie shook her head gently.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

“I *do* know, and I do understand. I can’t marry you, Mr. Peter, because—well, because I’m not in love with you.”

Peter brightened, and slid a little nearer.

“Is *that* all?” said he, with unconscious contempt. “Why, that’s not a reason at all. I didn’t expect you to be in love with me; how could I? But I’d be content without that: look here, I’d be content with *anything*—from you!”

Nannie drew a sharp breath. The man was unconsciously eloquent, touching. The tears sprang to her eyes.

“Ah!” said she, gently, “but I couldn’t! Listen, Mr. Peter. If I were older, and tired of the world and of getting my own living, as I shall have to do, and you were to say what you have said——”

“Well?”

“Well, I might say ‘Yes,’ and—just listen—I should be miserable and ashamed of myself for it. For you’re too nice not to have a girl’s best love, you’re too good——”

“Bother my goodness!” interrupted Peter, angrily. “You’re talking nonsense, my dear. If I’m so good and so nice, and you don’t like anybody else, do you suppose you could be my wife for long without caring for me a little? I’m not old, I’m not repulsive; it’s true I’m not as handsome, as dashing or as smart as those young fellows from Greyfriars whom you met the other day——”

Then he stopped short, feeling, with a slow thrill of amazement, that he had got on the right track at last. It was the truth, absurd as it seemed to him, that the

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

girlish fancies had already crystallized into a sort of hazy ideal of manhood, founded upon what she had seen of those well-turned-out, handsome men of Lord Thanington's party. And this mythical, impalpable something was enough to shut honest Peter, with his adoration and his modest hopes, out of the young girl's heart.

Inexpressibly foolish as it seemed to him, Peter felt on his side a pity for this girl-child with her ridiculous youthfulness, just as she had felt pity for him for his premature age. He put his arms round his knees and frowned.

Nannie made haste, as she supposed, to laugh him off the scent, if indeed she was conscious that he was upon it.

"Of course you know that's absurd, Mr. Peter. I'm not at all romantic, and I'm not as silly as you think."

"You are silly, though, I must tell you so," grumbled poor Peter, ruefully. "What do you think my aunt would say if——"

"Oh, you won't tell *her*, will you?" cried Nannie, in acute distress.

Peter shook his head.

"She'll guess," said he, shrewdly.

"Really?"

"Yes. She knew why I brought you over here this evening."

Nannie was amazed.

"Are you sure? When I didn't! I can't see how that can be!"

Peter smiled as he slowly raised himself to his feet. He was beginning to see that this girl had had her im-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

agination so much impressed by that pleasant afternoon, when she had found herself suddenly the object of the flattering attention of the great folk whom the neighborhood bowed down to, that she had had no room in her mind for acute observation of men and things since then.

"It's true enough," said he, as he unfastened the lantern and offered his hand to help her to rise. "Why, she knew from the moment I told her I'd bought the house."

Nannie said nothing to this, but walked across the hall in a rather zig-zag fashion, from which fact, Peter, following at the distance of a few steps, argued rightly or wrongly that she was much moved. At last, just before he opened the front door, she suddenly burst into sobs.

"What's the matter, dear? Don't cry!" cried Peter, tenderly, as he promptly put down the lantern and put his arm round her shoulder.

Nannie sobbed on.

"Oh! I feel so *wicked* to have disappointed you like this! And spoilt your pleasure in the house! Oh, I'd do anything, anything—I really would—to make amends!"

"Silly, silly girl!" said Peter, and growing bolder as he found her quite helpless and resigned to her grief, he put her head down on his shoulder and patted her gently and consolingly. He began, indeed, to pluck up heart, and to feel that the game was not up. "How are we to go and keep the secret if you give yourself away by making your eyes red? Come, come, if you don't dry your eyes I shall have to do it myself."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

And, suiting the action to the word, he took her pocket-handkerchief from her, when she had carried it half-way to her eyes, and very gently dried her tears, laughing at her softly as he did so.

“Oh, don’t! Thank you, Mr. Peter. You’re very kind. Of course you’re always kind!” said Nannie, tremulously, stifling a sob. “And you see you were quite right to call me silly; only I can’t help it!”

She found something comforting in the touch of his kind hand, and little guessed the intensity of the feelings which thrilled through the quiet man as he soothed and gently teased her.

But when they found themselves in the street together again, and he had once more drawn her hand through his arm, she suddenly realized that there was a bond between them there had not been before, and knew, thoroughly, beyond the possibility of mistake, that Peter was a friend, a rock of strength, a being upon whom to rely as she had never relied before upon any one but her dear father.

He would not let her talk as they traversed, at an easy pace, the short distance that lay between the big house and the little one. But he chatted on quietly about the garden and the trees and plants in it, leaving her time to recover her composure fully before she should have to undergo the ordeal of Miss Pemberton’s sharp eyes.

And Peter was pretty cheerful, too, being by no means so downcast as to his chances as he had been at the first moment of Nannie’s refusal. She had been so submissive, so helpless in her subsequent grief and remorse, had yielded herself up so easily to his gentle

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

attentions, that he was shrewd enough to see that he had at least made some headway with her whether she knew it or not.

So that when they both came face to face with the lynx-eyed spinster, who, anxious to learn all that had happened since they left her, met them in the little hall, Peter was able to take upon himself the burden of answering her questions about the house with a cheery voice and manner, while Nannie slipped past and ran up-stairs.

CHAPTER VI.

"WHAT has Anne been crying about?" asked Miss Pemberton, as she followed her nephew into the dining-room. "I thought tears were only the proper thing at the wedding itself, not in advance over the engagement."

"There's no engagement," said Peter, in as matter-of-fact a tone as he could manage to assume.

"No engagement! Didn't you ask her?"

Face to face with such a straightforward question, only the plain truth was possible. Peter supposed his aunt would be rather relieved to hear it, moreover.

"Yes, but she said no."

At once Peter realized his mistake. Nannie, with feminine intuition, had been much more shrewd, and had understood how indignant Miss Pemberton would be over the very event she ought logically to have desired. That this bit of a girl, brought to Bredinsbury by Peter's kindness, should have the audacity to refuse an offer which ought to have overwhelmed her by the honor of it, filled Miss Pemberton with indignation which showed itself at once in her face.

"She—said—*no*!" echoed she, aghast.

"Why, yes, aunt, as she had a perfect right to do, of course. Are you so anxious to give up housekeeping for me that you are sorry to hear it?"

But Miss Pemberton would not condescend to argue the point with him. With lips tightly pressed together,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

she fluttered about the room for a few minutes, busy with some small details of tea-caddy filling and the like ; and then, without heeding his remonstrances, she bounced off up-stairs, knocked at Nannie's door, and at once gained admittance.

"I hope I'm not intruding, my dear," she began at once, her tone belying her apologetic words. "But I should like to know if what Peter tells me about you and him is really true."

Nannie turned rather paler, and asked, after a moment's silence, "What is that, Miss Pemberton?"

"I fancied he said that he asked you to be his wife, and that you refused him. I misunderstood him, I suppose, or else *you* did."

She was so evidently angry that Nannie was at first rather frightened ; but she recovered herself and said :

"No. He is quite right. You didn't misunderstand, and I didn't."

An acid little smile tightened rather than expanded Miss Pemberton's mouth. The good lady perceived at once that Lady Joanna's words had come true, and that the girl had "had her head turned."

"You think, I suppose," said she, with withering sarcasm, "that a country lawyer is not a sufficiently exalted personage for you?"

"Oh, Miss Pemberton!" cried Nannie, impatiently.

But the lady would not let her go on.

"Or perhaps you flatter yourself that you will, at any rate, get dozens of offers as good, and that therefore you need be in no hurry."

But here Nannie, white with indignation, broke in and would be heard.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

“Miss Pemberton,” she said in a hoarse voice, panting between the words, “I don’t know how you, who have been so kind to me, can say such cruel things ! I’ve never thought of such things much, but of course I understand your sneers, and I know they’re all true. Very likely nobody will ever want to marry me, and I know quite well that Mr. Peter is much too good for me, and that it was a great honor for him to speak to me like that. Nobody knows that better than I ; I told him so. But,” and her tone dropped and became argumentative, “I don’t want to be married yet ; I haven’t thought about it much yet ; I’ve been thinking about other things, you know ; there was poor papa’s death, and the change it made, and our having to make up our minds what we would do. Don’t you see ? So that it came as a surprise when—when Mr. Peter asked me.”

Miss Pemberton was slightly mollified already. The girl spoke so simply, so sincerely, was so evidently telling the plain truth from her point of view, that it began to appear necessary to temporize. For the elder lady was too shrewd to think that, if Peter did not marry Nannie, he would settle down as before. No : he was a young man, he had been bitten with new ideas ; now that he had been once shaken up out of the old groove, it was clear to her that he would not sink back again. Neither would he keep the big house he had bought empty : if he did not marry Nannie he would marry some other girl. And making all allowance for the fact that she considered Nannie commonplace in appearance and character, still Miss Pemberton could not think of any Bredinsbury girl whom she would prefer to see installed as her nephew’s wife.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

For, when you come to think of it, it was, after all, some little cause for pride that Peter's choice should be a girl who had excited some attention in the great Greyfriars' "set" whom Miss Pemberton at the same time reprobated and admired.

So after a pause, during which she had taken a chair by the dressing-table while Nannie smoothed her hair, Miss Pemberton spoke again in a calmly reasoning tone.

"Well," she said, "I don't deny it was surprising that he should ask you to marry him"—and almost unconsciously she uttered these words with a rather unflattering implication—"but then, you know, he's seen so few girls."

Nannie struck in, not without malice. Now that her eyes were suddenly opened to the situation, she understood the elder lady's feelings pretty well. "But he'll see more now, won't he? Now that you've broken through your quiet way of life a little out of kindness to me, perhaps——"

Miss Pemberton waved her hand with dignity. This was mere trifling.

"I can quite understand, as I say, that you were surprised at first," she said. "But now you come to think of it, don't you see—I'm speaking for your good, you know, and from your point of view—don't you think, I say, that to marry Peter would be the best possible thing that could happen to you?"

Nannie's bright face fell into seriousness, and even into something like consternation. She hesitated so long before replying that Miss Pemberton began to tap the dressing-table impatiently with her finger-nails. Then the girl turned quickly and almost defiantly.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

“Listen, Miss Pemberton,” she said, with so much spirit in her tone that the elder lady’s eyes fell before hers. “It would be the best thing possible for me if I wanted to get married, if I saw nothing else before me. But it isn’t so. I don’t know whether it sounds unnatural and shocking to you—and I don’t know why it should—but I don’t feel as if I wanted to settle down in a little narrow groove yet, just handing out the candles and weighing the legs of mutton, and seeing that the drawing-room is dusted and all that.”

Miss Pemberton gave a gasp of horror, but Nannie, with a rapid gesture to show that she had more to say, rushed on with her speech.

“Of course I know that life’s all a groove, and that it must end in the candles and the dusting. But I don’t want to feel tied down so tightly yet. I feel that, if I were to do this, I should be miserable presently, and then make him miserable too—dear, kind Mr. Peter, whom I like and respect so very much. I shouldn’t like that to happen. Would you?”

But Miss Pemberton was amazed and impatient.

“I never heard a girl talk in that absurd way!” she said indignantly. “All that about mutton and candles is absurd. How do you want to spend your time? You can’t be always at concerts!”

This was a nasty “dig” at the subject of the head-turning. Miss Pemberton accompanied it by a significant flash of the eyes.

“Of course not,” answered Nannie, smiling. “I only meant what I said—that I didn’t want to tie myself down so soon. You see it isn’t as if I were passionately in love with Mr. Peter.”

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

But if Nannie's former speeches had been pin-pricks, this was a bombshell. Miss Pemberton drew herself up as suddenly as if she had been moved by a spring.

"Passionately in love!" she repeated, with a most expressive grimace. "My dear child, you're talking like a girl in a novelette! Real girls—nice girls—don't fall 'passionately in love' with anybody!"

Nannie was silent. Miss Pemberton saw, by a glance at her face, however, a certain obstinacy which she had not expected, and in face of which she felt that it would be unwise to press Peter's claims further. She got up with a sense and an air of dignified irritation, and with the brief intimation that supper was ready, sailed down the stairs, followed so quickly by Nannie that she had no opportunity of tackling her nephew privately on the subject of the young girl's discreditable wrong-headedness.

Poor Nannie felt rather shy as she went down; but Peter, foreseeing this, and pleasantly secure of the confidential footing on which he had established himself, contrived to be standing just within the door of the dining-room, so that he could give her a little pat on the shoulder and a reassuring look behind Miss Pemberton's back, as that lady marched into the room.

So that all went well at supper, Peter being unusually talkative, and contriving neatly to bridge over certain awkward gaps in the conversation which Miss Pemberton took a malicious pleasure in making.

When Nannie had gone to bed, Miss Pemberton's indignation burst forth in a tirade against modern young women and their fantastic ideals of independence. Peter listened with a good deal of interest to her very

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

partial account of her conversation with Nannie. And at the end he bowed his head thoughtfully.

"I think she's right," he said, rather ruefully, but with something like tenderness in his tone, as he bent over the fire. "It's that fulness of life, that enjoyment of the smallest novelty that makes her so much more attractive to me than other girls are."

"You don't know any other girls," snapped his aunt.

"I know what I should think of them if I did," replied Peter, with a grimace of conviction. "Nannie's something different from Mary Cole and the Fairfields, and the rest of them. But very likely she's right, and that effervescence of hers would all die away if she were cooped up with an old fossil like me."

"Fossil! Nonsense!"

"It would just be rubbed off like the bloom from a butterfly's wing, and I should feel as if it was my fault."

Miss Pemberton gave a snort and a shrug at the same time.

"Young men and women were not so fanciful when I was young," she commented dryly as she rose to go to bed.

On the following morning Miss Pemberton got a note at breakfast-time, which she read with a wry face and handed to her nephew without a word.

"Hallo!" cried he, turning with a smile to Nannie, "you're in luck to-day. This is from Lady Joanna, saying she will call for you this morning and take you over to Greyfriars to luncheon."

Nannie turned scarlet, and the tears came to her eyes.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

With a hurried glance at Miss Pemberton's grim face, she said in a stifled voice :

"Oh, no, I don't want to go. What can I do? What shall I do? Miss Pemberton, you'll tell her, won't you, that I can't——"

But Peter broke in cheerily :

"Nonsense, you must go. Don't you know that down here an invitation to Greyfriars is considered, like an invitation from royalty, as a command? Of course you must go. You don't want to offend them while you're staying with us, do you? Just when we're beginning to hope I may get some of his lordship's business, too!"

This was such a neat and clever tiding over of the difficulty she was in that Nannie shot at him a glance full of gratitude, and Miss Pemberton could make no great protest until she was alone with her nephew later in the morning. Then she said sharply :

"I really am surprised at you, Peter. Don't you understand the harm it does to the girl to go among those grand people? It makes her think she's a great beauty when they're kind to her, and she hasn't the sense to see that they're only laughing at her all the time."

Peter answered in so gravely displeased a tone that she gave up all idea of further opposition.

"I don't think she's as silly as you think, aunt," he said. "To refuse the invitation is out of the question. And it will do her no harm to enjoy herself a little, as she certainly will do. If they laugh at her she'll soon find it out, and then you will be satisfied, as it will cure her of any wish for more of their society."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

This rebuke was delivered curtly, and he was so evidently hurt and annoyed by her attitude towards Nannie, that Miss Pemberton dropped the subject at once, and even refrained from being very disagreeable when Lady Joanna, in her park-phaeton, with her celebrated pair of bay ponies, drove up to the door.

She need not, indeed, have envied Nannie her drive, for Lady Joanna said very little to her companion, and relaxed not a tittle of her usual dry, offhand manner in speaking to her.

At Greyfriars, however, all was different. In the first place, Nannie thought, as the phaeton drove quickly along the winding avenue of tall evergreens that led to the house, and caught peeps of a delightful park and garden, with long-limbed cedars and picturesque yews relieving the bareness of the leafless oaks and beeches, that this was the most beautiful place in all the world. And the first sight of the long, low, irregular building itself, with its wings and outbuildings of different dates, drew from her an involuntary "Oh!" of admiration, which made even dry Lady Joanna smile.

For the old gray stone house, the picturesqueness of which Lord Thanington had preserved while he added to its comfort, was indeed the thing Lady Joanna loved best in the world, next to her horses and her dogs—and one living person.

The outer door of the house was no sooner opened than Shirley Brede, smiling and amiable as usual, came out to meet them. Lady Joanna looked somewhat disdainfully out of the corners of her eyes as he greeted Nannie with a warmth of welcome which made the girl's cheeks redden.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

And then Nannie was plunged at once into an atmosphere of cozy comfort and luxury and ease, of beautiful sights and cheerful sounds, which, after the narrow, dull existence of the little house in St. Dunstan's, was a revelation of the possibilities of life. From the very first entrance into a big, square inner hall, covered with a rich, dark Turkey carpet, and hung round with tapestry to keep out the draughts, Nannie felt that she was in a new world. She looked from the big fire roaring under a hooded chimney-piece, with a high, cushioned settle above, to the paneling between the tapestry on the walls, the oak chests and carved chairs, the tall palms on their stands, and wondered whether life could ever be the same inside this paradise as it was in the gray world outside.

Young, inexperienced, excited as she was, Nannie, however, soon began to find out that the passions and caprices, the discords and the jars, of life in small houses, find their counterpart in more luxurious homes.

When she had taken off her hat and jacket, in a room which looked like the bedroom of a fairy princess, with its pale blue silk bed-spread covered with lace, and its inlaid suite of dark mahogany, she was taken down into a very long, low room, filled with a group of radiant ladies, whose dresses seemed to her extraordinarily gay for the morning, when, as Miss Pemberton and her own mother had informed her, it was proper to wear none but the simplest clothes.

It impressed itself upon Nannie, therefore, as they all gathered round her to listen to her ingenuous answers to the questions of one of them, that fashion must have changed since her mother was young.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

For here was a delicate dress of white cloth on a tall lady whose hands and throat sparkled with diamonds and shone with pearls ; and yonder was one of scarlet, with touches of gold, on a lady who spoke with a slight American accent, whose jewels were handsomer still.

Nannie was thankful that Lady Joanna's own dress, an uncompromisingly plain serge of an undecided snuff color, kept her own simple black merino frock in countenance.

It was not till later that she learned the names of the four ladies, all of whom she had seen at the concert. But she knew that the one who asked questions was Mrs. Pontesbury. She was neither tall nor short, and Nannie did not think she was either very young or very pretty ; her face was very white, with powder, Nannie thought, and her eyes looked unnaturally large. She spoke in a soft voice, and a drawling, lisping tone, which irritated the young girl, but which appeared to have some charm for the gentlemen, who, the young girl noticed, talked more to her than to any of the others.

“ And so you've never been down in the south of England before ? ”

“ No, never before,” said Nannie.

“ How nice ! Everything must be so new to you ! ”

“ Yes.”

“ Do you find any difference in the people ? ”

Nannie laughed a little.

“ What sort of people ? ” she asked, half shyly. “ I didn't know any people like—like you up in Lancashire.”

The tone of subdued admiration with which she said

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

this made them all laugh, and disarmed somewhat the tallest and handsomest of the ladies, Lady Violet Prees, who was rather inclined to be supercilious and abrupt to the unsophisticated guest.

Then Nannie found the eyes of the eldest of all the ladies, the only one who was older than Lady Joanna, fixed upon her with some interest. The name of this lady was Mrs. East-Denby, and she had very curious green eyes, and hair that was beginning to turn slightly gray. But her figure was slender, upright and young-looking, and her dress, though it was evidently less expensive than that of the others, was becoming and beautifully made. She was the only one of the ladies, except Lady Joanna, who sat upright, and she was busy all the while with the making of a piece of lace, from which she only occasionally looked up.

Although Mrs. Denby smiled at Nannie the moment their eyes met, yet the young girl retained an unpleasant impression of that half-second previous to the lady's smile, and of the coldly critical look of the curious green eyes.

Then some one spoke again, and looking round, Nannie found that Mr. Shirley Brede had come among them. He was made much of by the ladies, and had very little chance of speaking to Nannie, if he wished to do so ; but when they all went in to luncheon he contrived, evidently to the annoyance of Lady Joanna, who tried to prevent him, to take a seat beside Nannie, although it was pointed out to him that it belonged to some one else.

And from that moment onward he made it quite clear that nobody should prevent his talking to the pretty new-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

comer as much as he pleased. Nannie found him delightful, charming and boyish in manner, easily pleased, sympathetic, ready to answer the banter of the other ladies with gay good-humor, and to devote himself at the same time to the entertainment of the pretty stranger.

The tone of the conversation at luncheon-time was a little startling to Nannie, being decidedly less restrained than the talk she heard at St. Dunstan's or at home at Preston. But it had for her none of the horror it would have had for Miss Pemberton, for she did not take the daring speeches of Lady Cressage too seriously, and the slangy utterances of Lady Violet Prees seemed to her less shocking than novel. She liked both these ladies better than she did Mrs. East-Denby or Mrs. Pontesbury, although the former was amiable to everybody, and Mrs. Pontesbury was not so rude to her as Lady Violet was.

After luncheon all the ladies tried to coax Shirley Brede to walk with them or to play billiards. He was evidently the most popular man there, with the exception of their host, who was kind to Nannie, though he had little chance of speaking to her, so entirely was she monopolized by Shirley.

Nannie was following the other ladies out of the dining-room when she felt a light touch on her sleeve, and looking round she saw Shirley Brede's handsome, sunny face smiling into her own.

"If you don't want to be shut up for the afternoon with all these cats," whispered he, "come with me and I'll take you to see Thanington's prize poultry."

Nannie laughed and was refusing, when Lord Thanington came up.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"No, Brede," said he, "Miss Ince won't be interested in the chuckies. Let's take her to see the stables. You're fond of horses, of course, or you wouldn't be an Englishwoman!"

Nannie felt by no mean certain that she had any passion in this direction, but of course she said, "Oh, yes," and the next moment she found her retreat towards the morning-room cut off by Shirley Brede, who was now standing, with a persuasive smile on his face, holding out a man's overcoat, which he invited her to put her arms in.

Nannie laughed and blushed and shook her head, but he persisted, and Lord Thanington said she had better be wrapped up, until she reluctantly did as she was asked. Then Shirley ran across the hall, and returning with a soft, wide-brimmed felt hat, put it on her head with that easy yet not indecorous familiarity with which he treated all the ladies.

"It's too bad to make such a guy of me!" laughed Nannie, half amused, yet not wholly pleased.

"He couldn't do that," said Lord Thanington, in a reassuring manner that was half serious, half amused, yet wholly graceful and conciliating. And so Nannie, who indeed looked delightfully pretty in this quaint disguise, went out into the garden between the two gentlemen, and sauntered through the grounds, listening with interest to the earl's solemnly-imparted information about each foreign tree, and to Shirley Brede's flippant comments with even more amusement than she liked to show.

For of the stately earl, kind as he was, she was a little in awe; but she felt no awe of Shirley Brede.

CHAPTER VII.

Now the saunter through the stables of Greyfriars was a perfectly delightful thing, and Nannie thoroughly enjoyed the novel experience. As horse after horse was shown off for her benefit, Lord Thanington appearing as much gratified by her indiscriminating approval as if she had been a critic of the most distinguished rank, Nannie felt a shy delight, which shone in her eyes and communicated itself in some degree to both her companions.

Shirley Brede, in particular, appealed to her constantly to indorse his own opinion of the horses as they passed them in review. Indeed, he continued to monopolize so much of her attention and conversation that Nannie felt that he was indiscreet, and kept appealing in her turn to the earl, who, being much less talkative than Shirley, answered her always in few words but with his invariably kind smile.

When they had seen all the horses, and even made an inspection of the harness room, where Nannie had enjoyed the pungent smell of leather and polish, and had duly admired the newest invention in bits, Lord Thanington remained behind the others for a moment, in conversation with the head groom, and Shirley Brede took advantage of the fact to hurry Nannie out without him.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

“Thanington can’t tear himself away from his saddles and bridles, his stirrups and horse-cloths, when once he gets in there,” explained he, with a laugh. “He’s always got some wonderful invention in his head that is to revolutionize the old methods ; sometimes it’s a bit that’s to make the most vicious horse as meek as a lamb in a week ; sometimes it’s a saddle that can be made into a hut, a boat, or a cooking-stove in case of need.” While Nannie laughed merrily, Shirley went on, “Of course it never comes to anything, but it keeps him amused, and provides lots of pocket-money for the people who help him to carry out his fads. Now you shall come and see the chuckies.”

“Oh, I think I’d better go in now,” said Nannie. “I must be going home soon, and——”

“Not yet,” said Shirley. “By the bye, who’s going to take you back to Bredinsbury?”

“I don’t know.”

“I should like to,” said Shirley. “But I dare say Thanington will drive you over. I heard him say he wanted the dogcart at four.”

“Oh, no. That wouldn’t be——”

Shirley went on without heeding her protest.

“So in the meantime you must, as you say, propitiate the cats by spending an hour with them.”

Nannie looked rather shocked, or perhaps it would be truer to say that, by biting her lip and bending her head quickly, she tried to look so. But her dancing eyes betrayed her, and Shirley laughed.

“You know they *are* cats,” said he, softly. “I don’t know whether they’ve let you feel their claws yet, but, depend upon it, they will.”

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"But why should they? What have I done?" asked Nannie.

Shirley Brede, who was in the meantime gently but firmly leading her by a wide path between two velvety lawns, away from the house, answered in a decided and judicial manner:

"In the first place, Thanington's had the good sense to show an interest in you, and all these women resent that, as a matter of course."

"But how can they? Why should they?" urged Nannie. "I am not on the same plane with them. I don't belong to their world; I'm only a stray from another sphere altogether. Surely, surely you can't be in earnest! Even if you are," and she shook her head doubtfully, "I can't believe that what you say is true."

Shirley Brede waved his arm with mock resignation.

"I pass over your most cruel implication!" cried he, heroically. "And I'll condescend to show you that I'm right. In the first place, then, you start under a misconception: all women—all women, that is to say, who aspire to be thought attractive—are on the same plane. It follows then that rivalry among them, either conscious or unconscious, is a thing inevitable and not to be got away from. Therefore——"

"But I don't aspire to be thought attractive!" interrupted Nannie, quickly, with her cheeks on fire.

Shirley Brede gave her a mischievous look out of his blue eyes.

"Well, well, we won't argue that point," said he, laughing. "Anyhow, assuming for a moment that what I say is true—perhaps you won't mind assuming .

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

it for a moment?—then Mrs. East-Denby would naturally hate you because she also, to use your own words, is a stray from another sphere, who only holds her own by dint of making herself useful. She plays beautifully, sings amusingly, and is ready to do social dirty work. In a circle where the rest of the women are all too lazy even to read a book, she fills a very useful office.”

Nannie frowned a little. But this cynical estimate, while it shocked her a little, did not excite her incredulity. Mrs. East-Denby had made a curious and not wholly favorable impression on her.

“Lady Cressage isn’t like that!” said Nannie.

“No. But she’s a stray too. Comes from America. Married Sir Philip to get into English Society, and overlooked, or did not know, the fact that Society would be precious glad to get rid of Sir Philip.”

“Was that Sir Philip at the corner of the table, nearly opposite me?”

“Yes. Man with the red face. They say he was good for something once, but it must have been a long time ago.”

Nannie remembered the dislike she had taken to the coarse-looking, middle-aged man with the evident traces of self-indulgence on his heavy features.

“What a pity!” she said softly. “Lady Cressage seems so pretty and bright. And how beautifully she dresses!”

“Yes, she does dress decently,” admitted Shirley, with a patronizing air. “I don’t believe it’s difficult for a woman who has as much money as she has. It’s more to a woman’s credit,” he went on, with an elo-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

quent side look at Nannie's pretty face, "when she can make an impression without changing her clothes four times in the twenty-four hours."

Nannie modestly changed the subject, though the implied flattery, of a daring yet subtle kind she was not used to, was not without its effect.

"Lady Violet, the tall one, the very tall one—she's not American, is she?"

"Oh, no. Lady Vi's English enough and to spare. And she isn't the daughter of a stableman, as you might think by her language, but of 'a first-class earl that keeps his carriage.' I shouldn't so much mind the amount of slang she uses if only I understood it."

"Which is her husband?"

"Oh, he's away: he generally is. But this time it's not by his own choice, or hers. He's away on service in Africa."

"And Mrs. Pontesbury? She doesn't look as if she would dislike any one," said Nannie.

Shirley smiled with meaning.

"No. That's why she's the most dangerous of the lot," said he.

"Don't you like her, then? I thought every one did," said Nannie.

"Like her! Oh, yes, of course I do. As you say, everybody does. She takes care you sha'n't be able to help it. But—I shouldn't make a friend of Mrs. Pontesbury, if I were you!"

"Oh, I'm not likely to make a friend of any of them!" laughed Nannie. "I don't suppose I shall ever see any of them again."

Whereupon Shirley assumed a sentimental tone and

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

look, and asked insinuatingly, as he bent his handsome head to look into her face, "And wouldn't you mind if you were never to see any of us again?"

The unsophisticated girl blushed, and said with a shy laugh :

"Of course I should be sorry, but it can't be helped."

"It shall be helped, though," muttered Shirley, half playfully, but with enough significance under his light tone to make Nannie's heart beat a little faster.

She was dazzled, indeed, and fascinated by this good-looking, charming man, with his ringing voice, bright good-humor, and that air of amiable deference combined with easy comradeship which had stood him in good stead with far more experienced dames than little Nannie Ince.

It was impossible for her to avoid the inference that Shirley Brede felt for her some sentiment, of admiration or of attraction, which the other women failed to inspire him with. Nannie did not think this; she would have repudiated the suggestion if it had been made to her. But, subtly and surely, he made her *feel* it.

They had reached the outer edge of the lawn, and were in sight of the houses where the golden pheasants were kept. Nannie, feeling a little troubled about this long time that she was spending away from her hostess, and yet anxious not to offend her companion by appearing eager to dispense with his society, began to be a trifle restless, and to glance at the birds with an evidently uneasy longing to be away.

"Now I can see that you're worrying yourself," said Shirley, assuming almost a parental tone, and touching

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

her shoulder ever so lightly, with a playful assumption of grandfatherliness. "But indeed there's no need. Here, you know, people don't bind themselves by the petty rules which would seem a necessity to Miss Pemberton, for instance."

At this sudden mention of the grim spinster's name Nannie felt compelled to smile.

"Her notions of conduct and etiquette and all that sort of thing," went on Shirley, "date from a prehistoric time, when girls wore sandals and carried things they called reticules on their arms. What a dull time of it you must have had with her and that other person—her uncle, or brother, or whatever he is!"

Nannie stared in astonishment.

"Do you mean Mr. Peter? Why, he's quite young!" said she.

"Is he? Well, his back's so round that perhaps I've never properly seen his face. But I certainly had an idea he was old enough to be my grandfather."

Nannie looked at him with sudden suspicion. Although Shirley's tone was as light as ever, and certainly appeared to contain no note of malice, yet the girl's native shrewdness faintly suggested to her the truth, that in a lazy sort of way Shirley was resentful of some interest his young companion took in the young lawyer.

She stood up steadily for her absent friend.

"If he doesn't look as young as he is, it's because he works so hard," she said gravely.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. Attorneys have to."

Nannie's cheeks flushed.

"And then he's so good," said she, quickly; "better than any one I ever met, almost."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Better even than *Miss Pemberton*?" asked Shirley, with mock gravity.

Nannie burst out laughing, but recovering herself in a moment, said, with spirit:

"Yes, he's much better than she is. For she says ill-natured things about people sometimes, but he never does."

"What an insufferable person he must be! Why, half the fun one gets out of life is the ill-natured things one says and hears people say!"

"Oh, no, surely not! I should hate a person who delighted in saying ill-natured things!"

"Would you? I said some ill-natured things to you just now about the women here, and you only laughed. Did that laugh cover a profound hatred of me and all my ways?"

He bent his head again, laughing into her eyes. Nannie felt a strange pleasure in the quick exchange of glances, and then reddened and looked down.

"You didn't mean to be ill-natured, I'm sure. I took what you said for fun."

"You don't have much 'fun' with Pemberton, I suppose?"

Nannie was a little surprised at the sharp tone in which the question was put.

"Yes, I do," she answered rather more gravely. "Quiet fun."

"*Very* quiet fun, I should think! How is it, I wonder, that all 'good' people are so supremely dull?"

Nannie had set her face so persistently in the direction of the house that Shirley had been obliged to turn towards it. He delayed her steps, however, as much

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

as he could, by directing her attention now to this object and now to that.

To his last question before they reached the garden door at the back of the house Nannie replied simply, "I don't think they are really any duller than other people, the really good ones, I mean—not those who are only good because they've never had the temptation to be anything else."

"You are discriminating," laughed Shirley, who was amused by the sententious gravity with which she answered his questions.

At the door they met Lady Joanna, who was looking rather colder, with that strange, aloof, dry coldness of hers, than usual.

She looked at Nannie's costume very steadily, so that the young girl blushed and felt uncomfortable.

"I—I didn't want to put on this coat," she explained, nervously laughing; "it was Mr. Brede who made me wear it."

"He delights in making people look ridiculous when they give him the opportunity," said Lady Joanna, turning away towards the drawing-room in her offhand way, while the tears sprang to the poor child's eyes.

"Never mind her! She's always disagreeable," whispered Shirley as he helped her off with the coat. "She is the very queen of cats."

Nevertheless, Nannie noticed that when they had hastened to the drawing-room, following Lady Joanna, Shirley Brede went over to her, and kneeling on the seat of the nearest chair, took particular pains, if pains it could be called, to dispel his hostess's ill-humor by little teasing ways and affectionate half whispers.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Lord Thanington was standing on the hearthrug talking to Mrs. Pontesbury. He smiled at Nannie when she met his eyes, and showed her that he did not share his daughter's displeasure with her, a fact which was very comforting to the inexperienced girl.

There were one or two other men in the room among the ladies, but it struck Nannie as curious that nobody, including herself, paid much attention to the presence of any other man while the earl and Shirley Brede were in the room. The quiet dignity and good-humor of the former and the charming spoilt-boy manners of the latter made them so much the greatest favorites that, as far as the tastes of the ladies were concerned, their presence took the color out of the rest of their sex.

Nannie was already beginning to feel something of that concealed enmity of which Shirley had spoken, when Mrs. East-Denby slid quietly into a chair beside her, and began to talk in the kindest tone about her home and her friends.

Even while she remembered her own slight prejudice against this lady, and Shirley Brede's bitter description, she could not but feel grateful for the kindness which came to her aid just at a moment when she felt that she had drawn upon herself something like universal reprobation.

"You're very fond of music, aren't you?" said Mrs. Denby. "You were at the violin recital the other day, I remember."

"Oh, yes," said Nannie. "It was beautiful."

They were near a piano, and Mrs. Denby sat down before it and lightly played over one of the airs that

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

had taken the popular fancy at the recital. Nannie's eyes sparkled with admiration.

"I think it sounds even prettier as you play it than it did then," she said.

Mrs. Denby smiled.

"That's my principal accomplishment," said she. "If you like, I'll play you something you'll like when you come again."

"Oh, but I sha'n't come here again," said Nannie, regretfully. "I'm going back to my home in Preston before the end of the week."

Mrs. Denby smiled significantly.

"I don't think you will," she said.

"Oh, yes," said Nannie, "it's all settled. And I'm so sorry. I've had such a lovely time here!"

"Well, I shouldn't worry my head about that yet. If you do go, you'll come back. Greyfriars hasn't seen the last of you!"

Nannie felt her heart beating fast with pleasure. Though she reproached herself for her folly when the thought came into her head, yet it would come, that Shirley Brede's attentions to her, which had been very marked indeed, had caused Mrs. Denby to say this. She blushed; therefore, even while she shook her head, and said that the journey was too long to be undertaken very often.

"What journey is that?" asked Lord Thanington, who had come nearer to the two ladies, and now stooped to join in the conversation.

"Miss Ince is talking about the distance between Lancashire and Kent, Lord Thanington," said Mrs. Denby.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Ah, well, it is a distance that will have to be bridged over somehow," said the earl, with a smile at the young girl. "We can find room for a few Lancashire witches among the fair maids of Kent."

Then Shirley Brede came up and had a word to say.

"We might offer them an exchange, Thanington," said he. "But the thing must be managed somehow."

Nannie laughed at the nonsense, but felt an indescribable sensation of pleasure when Shirley joined in it. Every glance he gave her, every word he addressed to her, was full of flattery of the most insidious, intoxicating sort, expressing as it did the intensity of the interest he took in her.

He affected to grumble when Lord Thanington said he meant to drive Nannie back to St. Dunstan's himself, and told him that selfishness was his one fault. When Nannie had put on her hat and jacket, Shirley hung about her in the hall, talking to her with a sentimental look in his eyes and a tender inflection of the voice, which completed the fascination of the simple girl.

He was still engaged in assuring her that means would be found of bringing her back to Bredinsbury at an early date, when the voice of Lady Joanna, who had come quietly between the heavy curtains in the hall near which they were standing, made him look round quickly.

"Why, Shirley, you start as if you thought it was your wife!" said Lady Joanna.

"Oh, I should have started much more violently if it had been!" retorted Shirley Brede, lightly, as he made way for her to come up to Nannie with some hot-house fruit in a basket, which she said Lord Thanington wished to be sent to Miss Pemberton.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Nannie took the basket and stammered out some words of thanks. She did not know quite what she said, and wondered whether she spoke in an altered voice. But she was reassured when Lady Joanna turned from her at once to tell Shirley Brede she wanted him to go with her to the vicarage, to rehearse a part-song for some parish concert.

No, it was all right, she had done nothing, said nothing to betray herself. But though neither Shirley himself nor chilly Lady Joanna guessed that anything was wrong with her, Nannie felt, as she took her seat in the phaeton, and Lord Thanington got up beside her, that the joy of the day, of the beautiful house, of the pleasant incense of flattery and kindness, was utterly gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

Now at any other time Nannie would have much preferred the drive back to Bredinsbury with Lord Thanington in the afternoon to the drive thence with Lady Joanna in the morning. For the earl's daughter was abrupt and cold-mannered, brusque and matter-of-fact, and had the air of not particularly caring for her young companion ; while Lord Thanington was always amiable and courteous, and though by no means a brilliant talker, so kind and so polished in manner that no woman ever felt bored in his society, while to the simple little North-country girl he appeared the perfection of manly dignity and charm.

This charm, however, was by no means the same kind of fascination as that which the handsome and lively Shirley Brede had for her.

Her young imagination had already thrown a halo of romance and interest around the boyish figure, the mischievous blue eyes, the insinuating voice of Shirley, and this impression he had done his utmost to maintain and increase, according to the custom of his type. In his wholly light and wholly worthless way he was attracted by Nannie's freshness, as he was by any special charm of any woman ; and this being the case, it followed naturally that he exerted himself unremittingly to get that favorable consideration from

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

her which he regarded as his right from any woman he admired.

But to inexperienced Nannie, young enough to see good only in all whom she liked or admired, this evident and frankly-expressed attraction which Shirley found in her awoke very different feelings. Whether one can call them deep or serious feelings it is difficult to say. The life of a young girl lies so much more in imaginings than it does in realities, that perhaps the wounds struck at her ideals, her fanciful beliefs, are more profound than those sufferings which affect the actual life.

However that may be, it is certain that the sudden discovery that Shirley Brede had a wife came upon the girl with the force of a severe blow, and that it was none the less crushing that she was quite without definite hopes or beliefs with regard to Shirley's admiration for herself.

It opened her eyes suddenly, as nothing else could have done, to the immense difference that existed between these people at Greyfriars, these beautifully-dressed women and the men of their "set," and the homely, simple folk of St. Dunstan's and of her own circle at home.

Such openly expressed admiration as Shirley Brede had shown to herself, for instance, far exceeding any attention which had ever been paid to her before, would have been looked upon, in Nannie's modest circle, as indecorous, nay impossible, on the part of a married man to any woman.

Yet at Greyfriars this conduct of Shirley Brede had been looked upon, if not with approval, at least without

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

surprise ; and Shirley had shown not the least discomposure on being reminded, by Lady Joanna's question, of the fact that he was not a free man.

Of course Nannie was not able to brood over her discovery, or the considerations to which it gave rise in her mind, as long as the drive back to Bredinsbury lasted. Lord Thanington talked to her, not indeed so amusingly as Shirley would have done, but with his usual grave kindliness, about the places they passed and about his beloved horses.

It was not indeed until she had bade him good-by at the door of the little house in St. Dunstan's, after trying almost tearfully to thank him for his kindness, that Nannie felt the full force of the blow which had fallen upon her in that sensitive spot, her imagination.

Miss Pemberton was out, Peter was engaged with a client, so that the young girl was able to go straight to her own room and to live over again the events of the day without interruption. She was glad of this little respite from her hostess's questions, and by the time she went down to tea, and met Miss Pemberton coming in from her walk, she was fairly prepared for the ordeal she had to undergo.

"Well," began Miss Pemberton, too eager to hear an account of the visit even to go up-stairs to take her bonnet off.

Nannie hesitated to reply to this vague address, and Peter, who had just crossed the narrow hall into the dining-room, helped her out with a more definite question.

"How did you enjoy yourself at Greyfriars, eh?" asked he, as he took his seat at the table.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Nannie suddenly felt conscious, more strongly than she had ever done before, of the comforting power there was in Peter's steady, gray eyes, of the moral support there was in the quiet, steadfast nature. She smiled back at him in a way she had never done before, a way that moved him, and caused the blood to rush more quickly through his veins. She answered them both together, but her glance rested longest on Peter.

"Oh, yes, very much indeed. It's a beautiful place, and they were all very kind."

Miss Pemberton gave a slight toss of the head. She was dying to know every detail concerning the great house into which she had never penetrated, but she expected Nannie to pour forth her information spontaneously, and did not want to appear to show any great curiosity about either place or people. She wished to hear everything with an air of unwillingness, and was extremely irritated by Nannie's reticence.

The observant Peter had already an inkling that the girl's enjoyment had not been wholly unalloyed; knowing her exuberance of youthful high spirits, he had expected her to be overflowing with joyful excitement, and was shrewd enough to see, by the absence of this, that something had gone wrong.

It followed, therefore, from Nannie's reluctance to speak and Peter's reluctance to question, that there was nothing for poor Miss Pemberton to do but to swallow her pride and submit Nannie to a searching interrogatory.

"Did Lady Joanna talk to you on the way there?" she began with a sharply cross-examining air.

"Not very much," said Nannie.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Was the earl there when you arrived?"

"Yes."

"Who were the other people?"

Nannie gave a faithful list, and then, with almost an air of martyrdom, Miss Pemberton found herself forced to condescend to more questions before she found out what each lady of the party wore. Nannie instinctively brightened as she replied with a faithful and minute description of the ladies' dresses, and Peter smiled.

"Ah, now you're in your element, I see," he said. "This part of the story you give with real enjoyment."

Nannie laughed and reddened; but Miss Pemberton, though she had drunk in every detail with greedy ears, felt called upon to draw herself up and look prim.

"It seems to me," was her comment, "that the only lady there who dressed as a lady should, was Lady Joanna. Jewelry and fal-lals in the morning are in the worst possible taste, so *I've* always understood!"

"Ah, tastes change with the times," remarked Peter. "I don't see why ladies shouldn't look pretty in the morning as well as in the evening."

Nannie shot at him a glance which expressed her entire approval of this sentiment.

"Well," said Miss Pemberton, stiffly, "of course it's not for me to lay down the law for people in their position, which is far above ours, but I must say the modern fashion of making so much of appearance seems to me worldly and dangerous. I hope, Anne, you won't take it into your head to imitate them."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"I don't suppose I shall ever have the chance," answered Nannie, quietly, but with a look of demure mischief in her eyes which made Peter smile.

Miss Pemberton put her next question with increasing displeasure.

"And what did they talk about, these fine ladies in their peacocks' feathers?"

Nannie hesitated. To give anything like a full record of the conversation she had heard of Greyfriars, reproducing Lady Violet's slang and the Americanisms of Lady Cressage, as well as the compliments of Shirley Brede and Lord Thanington, was impossible. Peter, as usual, came to her assistance.

"Why, aunt," said he, "how can she remember all that was said by all those people?"

His aunt replied somewhat tartly :

"Of course I don't want to hear every word. But the conversation of people like these, who have more leisure for reading and for studying the world about them than we have, ought surely to have contained something worthy remembrance." She spoke again to Nannie. "And what did you have for luncheon?" she inquired, turning to a new interest.

Nannie gave her a careful and elaborate description both of the luncheon and all the appointments of the table, and then replied to a string of questions about the house and furniture.

"I suppose you didn't go into the grounds?" Miss Pemberton then went on.

"Yes, I did," said Nannie; and the blood flew to her cheeks as she spoke.

"Oh! And who showed you over?"

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"I went to the stables with Lord Thanington and Mr. Brede."

Miss Pemberton pinched her lips.

"Did none of the ladies go?"

"No."

"I don't suppose you found the stables very interesting when you know nothing of horses."

"Oh, yes, I did. I liked it very much. And then I saw the pheasants."

"Did his lordship take you to see those?"

"No, Mr. Brede."

Nannie had become scarlet, a fact which Miss Pemberton could not fail to notice.

"Oh! And I suppose you began to flatter yourself that Mr. Brede was quite an admirer of yours?"

There was a moment's silence, and Peter moved uncomfortably in his chair. Then Nannie drew herself up, cleared her throat, and answered boldly:

"Oh, no. Mr. Brede's married."

"Oh!" said Miss Pemberton in surprise. And Nannie was thankful to see that her information had the effect of stopping the catechism.

There was a short pause, and then Peter's voice struck gently in, as he asked Nannie if she had been invited to go to Greyfriars again. The blood rushed once more into her face.

"I told them," said she, quickly, "that I was going back home on Saturday."

His kind face clouded, and Nannie, touched, bit her lip. He was a dear, good, kind creature, this Peter, and his face looked beautiful, the girl thought, as he gazed long and steadily at the fire. Miss Pemberton,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

who had had tea without taking off her bonnet, now rose to go up-stairs. Both Nannie and Peter sat quietly near the fire, almost in silence, while the tea-things were cleared away, and then, as soon as they were alone, Peter said gently :

"I had a fancy, when you came in, that you hadn't enjoyed yourself quite so much as you expected to do. I hope I was wrong."

Nannie had started a little at this proof of his shrewd sensitiveness to any fact that concerned her. Her face quivered a little as she answered, in a low voice :

"I did enjoy myself—enormously. It was all so different, such a bright, easy kind of life. But oh ! I couldn't have told Miss Pemberton everything, you know !"

And with a comforting consciousness that here was somebody to whom she could tell everything, Nannie exchanged with Peter a little nod and smile.

"No, I suppose not," said he.

"She would have been shocked by the way they talked, some of them," went on Nannie, confidentially.

"She wouldn't have seen that it was only fun."

Peter nodded again.

"These people don't take life as seriously as we small fry do," said he.

Nannie turned to him with animation.

"No, that's just where it is," she said eagerly. "I caught myself wondering whether death and marriage, and the great big important things of life, could be just the same to them as they are to other people."

Peter gave an appreciative little grunt.

"I can answer for it," said he, "that one of those

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

things you have mentioned isn't looked upon as seriously."

Nannie suddenly drew a long breath, which showed that she knew what he meant.

"No, indeed," said she, in almost an awestruck tone.

"Marriage," went on Peter, didactically, keeping his eyes steadily on the fire, "is not the same thing at all with these smart people as it is with humbler folk." Then, after a moment's pause, he went on, dilating upon this subject with intense pleasure, though still with a decorous pretense of keeping to generalities, "My aunt would say, of course, that it ought to be the same, and that husbands and wives are the same to each other all over the world. But that isn't the exact truth, as you know. When you are rich enough to go where you please, and to be burdened with comparatively few duties, when you have two or three houses to live in, and perhaps a yacht, why, it can't be as important to you to have a lifelong companion after your own heart as when you are bound to see the same face in the same place day after day as long as your life lasts."

Nannie listened in silence, bending her head, moved almost to tears by the depth of feeling in his voice. How she was beginning to like the sound of that voice, to connect it always with kindness and sympathy! And how she would miss it when she could hear it no longer!

This thought flashed through the girl's mind even as she heard these words, uttered in a tone so quiet that it was almost monotonous, and even as she answered, without looking round, "Yes, yes, that's true. But I don't think I understood it before."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"This Mr. Brede, for instance——" began Peter. And Nannie started and began to tremble so unmistakably that he stopped.

She suddenly looked up at him, and said hurriedly, "Yes, yes. It did surprise me to learn that he had a wife."

And, as their glances met, the girl was conscious that, in the steady, shrewd gray eyes that looked upon her so kindly, there was distinct recognition of the pain, the bewilderment which her discovery of the day had caused her. The tears rushed to her eyes, and she looked again at the fire, plucking at her black stuff dress. Peter said gently, after a moment's silence :

"I don't want to be censorious ; but if his wife cares more for him than he does for her, she must have an unhappy time of it, if all they say of him is true. But then again," went on Peter, in his measured, unimpassioned tone, "I dare say it isn't all true."

These last impartial words struck Nannie afresh with a sense of Peter's unlikeness to anybody else. He must always be just ; he would have been ashamed to be anything less than just, even to a rival, if there had been any question of rivalry.

And while she was still inwardly putting these two men side by side, comparing the steady trustworthiness of the one with the outward fascination of the other, Miss Pemberton came in again, and the subject of Shirley Brede was not taken up again.

No further attempt was made by anybody to delay Nannie's approaching return to her home, so she packed her little trunk on Friday morning, after writing to her

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

mother to tell her the time at which she expected to arrive at Preston on the following day.

At luncheon Peter was very silent, hardly, indeed, looking up from his plate while the meal lasted. He was very pale, and his aunt told him abruptly, during a pause in the conversation she was keeping up with Nannie, that he was keeping too close to his work. She said this in such an odd manner, with a sort of querulousness unusual in her, that Nannie and Peter both looked up quickly, and were surprised to see tears gathering in the old spinster's eyes. They were, however, not allowed to fall, and as Peter laughed off the subject of his supposed indisposition, another topic was quickly started, and she did not address her nephew again.

When the meal was over, the young solicitor sprang up from his chair with great abruptness, and said to Nannie, without raising his eyes to her face :

"Would you like to go to the service at the cathedral this afternoon for the last time?"

"Oh!" began Nannie, in a tone of something like distress. "I don't think——"

Miss Pemberton cut in quickly, "Yes, Anne, you'd better go."

Nannie looked scared. But she made no further opposition to what was evidently the wish of both; and it was at once settled that Peter should take her. At a few minutes before four, therefore, she was ready, and they started out together, both very silent, and both somewhat anxious and depressed.

Nannie was feeling guilty and miserable. She could not but know that, in all innocence, she had brought

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

pain and unhappiness upon this kind, good fellow by whose generous wish she had had her most pleasant holiday. Peter, on his side, was bent on removing the feeling from her mind, so that her last thought of him should not be a gloomy one. His very anxiety, however, on this head defeated its own object, and for some time he could think of little to say.

But when they got in front of the house he had bought his eyes traveled instinctively from the old gables to her face ; and Nannie, meeting the involuntary glance, was struck with a sudden tenderness towards him which she had never felt before. She felt the full poignancy of the disappointment she had dealt him, and the beauty of the manner in which he had borne it. She had a sudden wish to speak to him about the house, and instinctively slackened her steps, not knowing how to frame a question.

So it was he who spoke first, and not she. And the cheerful tone he assumed cut her to the quick.

“ You won’t know the place when you next come to Bredinsbury,” he said. “ I shall have it painted and done up.”

“ And will you furnish it with old-fashioned things, as you proposed ?” asked Nannie, not caring what remark she made as long as she said something to cover the emotion she felt.

“ Oh, that won’t be my affair, but my tenant’s. I shall let it,” said Peter.

Nannie instantly hastened her steps, without another word. She knew now the extent of the mischief she had done, and though Peter suddenly perceived the pain his words had unwittingly given her, he did not know

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

how to efface the impression. He began to talk of Greyfriars, of her mother and sisters, of anything that came into his head, and kept up what was almost a monologue until they reached the cathedral.

All through the short service Nannie's feelings towards the kind, good friend by her side, to whom she was so soon to say good-by, were growing more and more tender, more and more affectionate. The touch of his hand, as they held the same hymn-book, affected her as it had not done before. She was struck, as the view of his whole head in profile caught her eye, by the nobility of the grave, slightly-worn, and rather handsome face.

When they left the building together, the last notes of the solemn organ music still in their ears, both were again very silent, but neither was any longer unhappy. The mere proximity of this girl whom he loved had been enough to banish Peter's depression; while her thoughts of him had merged into feelings which were reflected in her softened eyes.

Peter, looking at her, was conscious of the change, and smiled down at her as they walked under the old arch of the Close. It was dark by this time, but if they could not see each other's face very clearly, each had a distinct consciousness of good-fellowship, of a fresh link forged in their friendship.

Or perhaps it was something more than this. For, when they got near the old house with the gables again, Nannie stopped short, and looking from the overhanging house to her companion, raised her face a little, and whispered softly, "Oh, Mr. Peter, I'm so—so sorry!"

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Peter was seized by an inspiration. Stopping short in his turn, he bent his head until his eyes looked close into hers, and whispered huskily, "But—but couldn't you——?"

Nannie drew a long breath. Her eyes were so dim she could scarcely see.

"Oh! oh, yes," she almost gasped. "I—I think I could!"

CHAPTER IX.

Nobody ever rang the bell at the little house in St. Dunstan's ; they just opened the door and walked in. Peter and Nannie were a long time over this performance : it was quite dark by that time ; there was hardly anybody about ; not one of the poor little street-lamps was near : it was only human nature that Peter should take advantage of these facts to give Nannie those kisses which he was afraid he might not have the opportunity of giving her indoors.

When they entered the house, Miss Pemberton met them in the narrow hall, and stared at them without speaking by the dull light of the gas-lamp over the door.

Nannie, confused, uttered a little exclamation, and grew red, and looked at Peter. He laughed, so joyously, with such a ring in his voice that no friend of his would have recognized it. And then something happened which amazed Nannie beyond words. The usually tart spinster came quickly towards her, looked searchingly into her face, and then, suddenly putting her right arm quite tenderly round the girl's shoulder, stooped to say in a low voice :

“ Now mind you're good to him ; he deserves it.”

Nannie looked up at her in surprise. If her own bright eyes were moist, why, so also were the less lovely orbs of stern Miss Pemberton.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"How—how did you know?" gasped the girl, quickly.

"How did I know?" Again her usual asperity appeared for a moment in Miss Pemberton's scoffing tones. "Don't I know my boy too well to believe that any girl in her senses could hold out against him long?"

Miss Pemberton was not exactly weeping; she was sniveling. And this display of feeling touched the hearts of both the young people as no more picturesque, more theatrical display of emotion would have done. But it was only Nannie who was surprised by it. To Peter, who knew his aunt better, who had loved and respected her since his childhood, it was only what he had expected. The little party was a very happy one that sat down to tea in the small house at St. Dunstan's that evening.

But when she was at last alone in her own room, Nannie gave way to certain misgivings, and wished she had not yielded to the temptation of Peter's affectionate distress. Although she liked him even heartily, although she respected him and felt a strong trust in his friendship, in his goodness, she was not what is called "in love" with him at all; and in the absence of any of that girlish enthusiasm which she had expected to feel if she should ever be "engaged," it was only natural that fears and doubts should fill her heart, and that a shrinking mistrust of herself and of her power to live up to the ideal Peter had formed of her, should take the place of the quiet happiness of that evening.

She had indeed been surprised and even alarmed by the depth of passionate feeling suddenly betrayed by

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

the usually calm and undemonstrative Peter. All the color and vigorous warmth which was lacking on her side was present in superabundant degree in the passion he felt for the first girl who had ever made a serious impression on his heart. A kind of terror seized her at the thought of the life before them, and of the disappointment which, she felt sure, he would feel in her when the first glow of his love was past.

With the mingled simplicity and shrewdness of a very young girl, she felt herself to be unworthy the single-minded devotion she had so innocently inspired in this man, and was yet wholly ignorant of the deep springs of natural feeling which made his honest love as steadfast as it was deep.

How could this girl, scarcely out of her heart's childhood, recognize that she, in her person, in her freshness and youth, stood with this single-minded, honest fellow for Womanhood and Beauty in all their potent, inevitable charms?

In the morning, when she opened her door, she found a basket of freshly-cut flowers standing outside, and her eyes filled with tears as she took up the offering, which had been deposited noiselessly on the landing before she was awake.

Any idea she might have had of expressing her timid doubts to Peter was dispelled upon her first meeting with him that morning. He was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs, a happy, transfigured Peter, with joy shining in his eyes, and an unaccustomed vigor and briskness in every movement. There was something soothing, comforting to her doubts, in the very touch of his hand, in its caressing clasp of her shoulder :

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

something that told her she might trust this man as fully as ever man might be trusted. And although she still suffered from a humbled feeling of her unworthiness, it was impossible for her not to feel the comfort of his kindness as well as pride in his love.

After breakfast he took her into the town and bought her a ring, a little half circlet of pearls with diamond points, which Nannie thought overwhelmingly splendid and beautiful.

"How surprised they'll be! May always wanted a ring!" cried she, as they came out of the shop. "But she never thought of one as pretty as this!"

Peter smiled at her ingenuousness, but he was proud, too, of his gift and of her delight in it. Never had he seen himself before in the character of a giver of rich gifts, and the pleasure he felt was even greater than Nannie's.

But the nearness of the time of parting was a terrible thing to bear; and it was not only Nannie, but Peter, who felt the cloud of doubt and fear a little later as they walked together to the station. Nannie was in a subdued mood; she had been touched by Miss Pemberton's kindness at the last, as well as bewildered by the rush of feelings induced by the moment of departure.

"I can't realize it all!" she said to her companion, in a low voice, as they stood on the platform waiting for the train. Peter was trembling in every limb, and looking miserable and downcast.

Before he could answer her, their attention was called to the appearance of a group in whom they recognized the liveries of the Greyfriars' servants, while Nannie, with a start, heard also the voices of some of the guests

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

from the earl's place, and among them that of Shirley Brede.

The next moment she found her hand shaken by Shirley himself, who, with a good-humored salutation to Peter, turned to ask her if she was really going away.

"Yes," struck in Peter, proudly, while his face flushed and he instinctively drew himself up with some pride, "she's going back home to her mother for a few weeks ; but you'll soon see her back again, Mr. Brede, I can promise you!"

Nannie blushed and bit her lip, awkwardly conscious of the opinion in which Shirley held poor Peter. Shirley turned quickly to Peter, and delighted him beyond measure by seizing his hand, shaking it heartily and saying with warmth, "I understand. And I congratulate you sincerely, Mr. Pemberton, upon your good taste and your good fortune."

Poor, simple Peter was charmed ; but Nannie felt uneasy, though she scarcely knew why. The next moment Shirley had turned to her.

"I congratulate you too, Miss Ince, and finally I congratulate Bredinsbury and Greyfriars on the fact that they will soon boast a most welcome and beautiful neighbor." He turned to Peter : "Are you going to see her on her way ?"

"No farther than this, I'm sorry to say," said Peter, pitifully conscious of the disadvantage his business put him under.

"Won't you come up with us ? There's Lady Cressage and Bramber, and——"

"Oh, no, no, thank you," said Nannie, hastily.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

And Peter turned to Shirley with a smile.

"We don't do things in a very grand way, Mr. Brede," said he.

"You don't mean to say you're going to let her go up in a third-class carriage, with all the old market-women?"

"I'd rather, I'd rather, please," whispered Nannie, almost with the tears in her eyes.

She was by no means anxious to join the party which contained Lady Cressage.

Shirley retreated a step as Nannie jumped into the compartment, the door of which Peter was holding open for her.

"Oh, well," said Shirley, as he raised his hat, "I shall see you at Charing Cross." Nannie was protesting by faint murmurs; but he went on, with a smile to Peter, "I'll see her safely into a hansom, Mr. Pemberton."

As Shirley turned towards the saloon which had been reserved for his own party, Peter put his head into the window of Nannie's compartment.

"What a nice fellow he seems!" said he, in the innocence of his heart. "I don't wonder everybody likes him!"

Nannie, who had grown suddenly pale, said in a low voice, "I don't want him to see me into a cab. Do tell him so, please."

"I can't do that; it would look ungracious," said Peter. "But perhaps," he went on, seeing how the cloud deepened on Nannie's face, "you'll be able to miss him in the crowd."

One last kiss, hastily and, as it were, furtively given,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

and then Peter, with his face expressing the wistful tenderness in his heart, was left standing on the platform, while the train which bore Nannie and Shirley Brede to London started slowly on its way.

Nannie's desire to escape a further meeting with Shirley was deep and genuine. She now found that she had not yet got over the shock of her discovery concerning him, and she was filled with a sensitive dread of what he would say to her on the subject of her engagement. Her hopes of escaping him, however, were dashed to the ground, for she had scarcely got out of the train at Charing Cross when she heard his bright voice behind her, asking where her luggage had been put.

He engaged a porter, got the little trunk out of the van and had it put on a hansom before Nannie could utter much by way of protest. Then he took her by the arm as if she had been a child and led her towards the refreshment-room.

"Now," said he, "I must see that you have something to eat and drink to help you on your way."

"Oh, no, no," protested Nannie; "indeed, I've only just started, and I've got some sandwiches Miss Pemberton gave me, and——"

"Sandwiches! That for Miss Pemberton's sandwiches!" retorted Shirley, with an airy snap of the fingers. "Where's the fun of traveling if you don't refresh yourself at every buffet and buy a paper at every bookstall?" And he led her onwards steadily. "Besides, you heard me promise our honest friend on the platform that I would look after you; and how could I look him in the face if I failed to keep my word?"

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Nannie was silent, but she was still troubled. It frightened her to find that she was so much disturbed by this meeting with him, that the touch of his hand excited her into a strange commotion of feeling, in which indignation and resentment struggled with her instinctive pleasure in his society. He paid no heed to her remonstrances, but insisted on her taking a chair at one of the little tables in the refreshment-room and upon her eating the wing of a chicken. As she would not have a glass of wine, he ordered a cup of coffee for her.

Then the real ordeal began.

"I told you means would be found to bring you back if you left Bredinsbury, didn't I?" said he, confidentially, as he took the chair beside her in order that he might be close enough to whisper these details, which of course were not suited to the public ear. "And now I may confess that Thanington had an inkling of the means which would be taken to keep you."

"What!" exclaimed Nannie, astonished and bewildered by the satisfaction Shirley showed; for she, in her innocence, had expected him to take quite another view of her engagement. "Lord Thanington knew?"

"Yes," said Shirley, "so did I. The very first time I saw you I predicted what would happen."

"But you couldn't predict that I should say yes," said Nannie, rather nettled, she scarcely knew why.

"Oh, yes, I could. It would have been madness to say anything else. He's got a decent business; he's lived so quietly that Thanington says he's got money of

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

his father's saved ; and you've already made your *début* so happily down here that you'll take a very different position from that of the ordinary solicitor's wife."

"But," cried Nannie, aghast, "I've never thought of those things. I don't wish to think of them. I'm going to marry him because I like him, and——"

"Of course you like him," interrupted Shirley, imperturbably ; "we all do. He's a very good fellow, and a good man of business besides ; and I expect he'll get a lot of Thanington's business, and we shall all live happy ever after."

And, with a laugh which had all the happy irresponsibility of a boy's, Shirley turned the conversation to her journey.

Nannie was very angry at his matter-of-fact and flippant tone, and at the airy manner in which he took it for granted that her engagement to poor Peter could be the outcome of interested feelings only. But, try as she would to be reserved and dignified, it was not only impossible to hope to make any impression upon Shirley, but it was also impossible not to be infected with his high spirits, and grateful for the trouble he took in looking after her. He would have crossed London to Euston with her in the hansom if she had let him ; and when she refused absolutely to allow this, he handed her into the cab with so much care, he pressed her hand with such warmth of assurance that he should never be happy till he saw her back again, that she found it out of the question to be anything but gracious and grateful.

When she was alone again, however, it was inevitable that she should be a good deal disturbed by the new

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

view of things he had introduced her to. While on the one hand she was excited and fluttered by the suggestion that her life would not be the dull round that Miss Pemberton's was, and that in truth Nannie herself had rather dreaded, yet on the other the girl saw clearly that a combination of the gayety and ease of life at Greyfriars, with the austerity and sedate dulness of St. Dunstan's was out of the question. They were things apart, incapable of amalgamation : what was permissible and desirable in the eyes of the one, was indecorous and unseemly according to the notions of the other.

No, Peter and duty stood on the one side, with a vision of the old house and the trivial round of duties which would have seemed attractive enough if she had been passionately in love with her future husband. And on the other side were gathered together, in her imagination, Shirley and his gay companions of both sexes, with Greyfriars and the horses, and luxury and ease.

Unhappily, to the impulsive, pleasure-loving girl, the picture of the enjoyments which she must not have dulled sadly that of the modest domestic joys to be looked forward to in her future home.

On her return home the excitement caused by the news of her engagement excluded every other thought for a time. But when this was over, and Nannie had settled down once more for the few months which were to elapse before she became Peter Pemberton's wife, the feeling that she had been too precipitate, that she had made a mistake, grew gradually stronger, and made its way into the letters she wrote in answer to Peter's loving epistles.

She expressed her doubts, her fears that she would

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

not make a good enough wife for him, that the position of mistress of his grand new house would be too onerous for her, at last so plainly that, just six weeks after her return to Preston, when she had sent off a particularly downcast letter, she was startled, on returning from a walk one afternoon, to find Peter himself sitting in the little drawing-room with her mother.

She was surprised herself to find how pleased she was to see him. And the lighting up of her face when his eyes first met hers cleared away at once the miserable doubt which had brought him so unexpectedly to her side. On the first opportunity, which Mrs. Ince tactfully gave them, he rose from his own seat, and taking Nannie into his arms gave her a long hug.

"There," said he, "and there, and there" as he printed three long kisses on her lips, "that's to pay myself for the anxiety you've caused me, you little witch, and that brought me up here. I know it's all right now, I saw it in your eyes when you first met me. But if your little face hadn't lighted up, I—I"—the good fellow's voice faltered—"why, I was going to let you go free, and I was going to take myself off, like a whipped cur with his tail between his legs, to get over it as best I could."

"Oh ! oh !" cried Nannie, touched with an emotion beyond words to express, "how could you think I would be so ungrateful——"

"No, no, don't use that word," interrupted he, with vehemence ; "it's not your gratitude I want ; you've got nothing to be grateful for, and you never will have. It's I am grateful to you, little one, for letting me love you."

There was the whole history of the man's love, of his

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

attitude towards her. He adored her ; he was thankful for the privilege. He would have forgiven her for throwing him over, and he was crazy with joy when he found she was glad to see him.

Nannie was frightened by all this. How could she ever be good enough, sweet enough, bright enough to keep such love, to be worthy of it ? He would have, she felt, to overlook so much. ' For Nannie's own opinion of her capabilities was more like that of Miss Pemberton than like his.

Mrs. Ince and Lilian were delighted with Peter. They said he was much handsomer and much nicer than Nannie had prepared them to expect ; and this statement, made publicly in Peter's presence, made him wince and Nannie blush.

The fact was that Nannie's ideals had of late been formed upon the men she had met at Greyfriars ; and Peter, whose clothes were made by a Bredinsbury tailor, and not by the best of his craft, suffered a little, at least in appearance, by comparison.

She was rather startled when Peter informed them all that his purpose in coming up was to get Nannie to agree to marry him in the following month, instead of waiting until August, as had been at first proposed.

Nannie made objections, but he would not listen.

" If you're willing to marry me in August, why not in April ? " said he, simply. " You know I have to take my holiday when I can."

" But it's four months earlier ! "

The rest of the family applauded him for his eagerness, and did not give Nannie the support she wished. So in the end it was settled that he should come up in

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

May, marry her very quietly, and take her to Torquay for the honeymoon.

“Oh!” cried Lilian, with a sudden qualm, “but May marriages are unlucky, you know.”

“I shall think it unluckier if it’s put off till June,” observed Peter, quietly. “But if Nannie likes to avoid the ill-luck by marrying me in April, why, I’m quite ready to fall in with her views.”

So amid general laughter it was decided that May should after all be the month, and that they would snap their fingers at fate and risk it.

And the time flew quickly by while Nannie and her family made the modest preparations, and after all she felt that she was being breathlessly hurried into it when the great day came round, and Peter, who had arrived at Preston the evening before in a brand-new coat made in London, actually in London, married her and took her away with him down into the south, where the winds blow soft, and where they were to be happy ever after.

CHAPTER X.

SHE had been hurried into it, urged into it, persuaded into it. That was what Nannie felt as she looked at Peter with something like consternation when they got into the train.

When she had urged to her mother that she would like to wait until at least a year after her father's death before plunging into the dignity of a married woman, Mrs. Ince had argued that her father would have been the first to insist upon the desirability of her settling down in life with so worthy and kind a helpmate as Peter.

This was, of course, true, and Nannie, who had only used the argument as an excuse for the delay she wanted, found nothing to say in answer to her mother's words.

Poor Mrs. Ince had, naturally enough, welcomed the chance of marrying her youngest daughter so early and so well, and was terribly afraid that Nannie's unaccountable irresolution might end in the breaking off of the match. Nobody had ever wanted to marry Nannie up in Preston, where, indeed, the girls had few friends of their own age, and both Mrs. Ince and May were rather surprised to learn from Peter that Nannie's good looks had made something like a small sensation in the south.

It was not to be wondered at, then, that Mrs. Ince

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

heaved a sigh of relief when the ceremony was over and the happy pair had started, or that Nannie's strongest feeling, as the train moved out of Preston station, was a slight resentment at the pleasure with which her own family had bidden her adieu.

"They're glad to get rid of me!" she exclaimed rather bitterly, as she shook the last of the rice out of her black hat, and out of the silk folds in the front of her bodice.

She had wanted to be married and to go away in black, out of respect to the memory of her father, who had not been dead eight months. But this had been declared impossible, so that her wedding dress, which was also her traveling gown, was of lavender cashmere, with folds of silk of the same color forming a little vest in front; and in this costume, with a cape of the same color and a pretty black hat, Peter thought his bride the loveliest creature the sun had ever shone upon.

"No. They're only glad to know you're in good hands," whispered he, gently, with such tenderness in his kind eyes that Nannie suddenly felt the tears come into hers, and whispered back that it was quite true.

They had not retained a carriage to themselves; both had shrunk from making themselves conspicuous by doing so; but Peter had taken first-class tickets, a piece of extravagance which had been hailed with some delight by the family as a sample of the glories in store for Nannie in her new life.

The young bride herself was by no means insensible to this unaccustomed luxury, and she presently said

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

to Peter, who could think of nothing to say worthy the occasion, that this was a very different journey from the last she had taken southwards, "when I didn't know what you and Miss Pemberton would be like, or whether you would be vexed because May hadn't come too!"

"Do you feel happier than you did then?" asked Peter, who had left his corner seat opposite for the one by her side.

Nannie nodded and looked away with a smile. Then she leaned back against the cushions and said mischievously, in a low voice, that she had only once traveled first-class before, and then only for a couple of miles, "because the others were all full."

"I'm so afraid," laughed she, "of looking as if I were not used to this sort of thing, and letting down my dignity."

Peter roared with laughter, and then suddenly dropped his voice to assure her that she should never travel any other way again.

"And you should see the nice things I've got for you—the high-backed chairs you like, and a little writing-table like the one you spoke of at Greyfriars, and that oak suite you liked in Kennett's window for the dining-room."

"Oh, Peter, what a lot of money you must have spent! What—what did Miss Pemberton say?"

Now Peter would not for worlds have repeated what his aunt had said, about "turning Anne's head, which was none too steady as it was," and about setting a beggar on horseback, with other comments to the effect that Nannie ought to think herself lucky to get a hus-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

band at all, "seeing that she was, after all, only an insignificant little thing whom nobody would look at twice when they had got used to the novelty of her." But his face changed ever so little, and Nannie, making a shrewd guess as to what had taken place, burst out laughing, and made him blush.

"Of course her notions are old-fashioned," said he, quickly. "She's used to the old red mahogany and horsehair, and having done without a drawing-room for so long, she is rather shocked at such a piece of extravagance. At the same time she tells everybody all about the new house, and how much everything in it is going to cost, in a way that makes me think she is rather proud of it all the time. She makes me feel like a spendthrift whose goings-on shed a sort of romance over a commonplace family."

Nannie laughed at this notion, and asked more questions, deeply interested.

"Do you remember that day I made you look at some carpets in Kennett's window?" asked he.

Nannie remembered very well; she had been rather puzzled at the time, both by Peter's interest in things which she had not supposed to concern him, and by Miss Pemberton's snappishness. Already dim hopes had been forming in Peter's mind, and dim fears in his aunt's.

"Well, I have bought two you admired—the red one for the dining-room, and another you liked for the drawing-room. I've only begun to furnish three rooms; the rest I thought you'd rather do yourself. So I only got enough things to start with. It will be fun to choose the rest, won't it? But you wouldn't have

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

cared to go back to the old house while we had carpets laid down, would you ?”

“ Oh, no,” said Nannie, quickly.

To begin her married life under the same roof with Miss Pemberton would have been a trial she was heartily glad to be spared. The good lady was not to be dispossessed of her old home ; Peter had resolved to use the little house still as an office, and his aunt was to give up the sitting-room on the ground floor for a private office for him, leaving the old and larger room for the clerks, now that the young solicitor promised himself to increase his staff. The whole of the upper part of the little house would now be left to Miss Pemberton, and Peter had engaged to fit her up one apartment as a drawing-room, where she could receive her friends. With many remonstrances, most of them barbed ones directed at the extravagances entailed by his new wife, Miss Pemberton had consented to this arrangement.

This little confidential chat about the beautiful house was delightful, and they went on in imagination furnishing the rooms, and wrangling happily about the available spaces, until their one companion, a middle-aged gentleman of military aspect, gradually awoke to a strong suspicion of the truth as to their situation, and thereupon took it into his head to feel much aggrieved by it.

Although they behaved with the greatest circumspection, and Peter took care never to touch Nannie’s hand except under cover of the *Lady’s Pictorial* or *The Field*, with which he had provided himself, the fury of the military gentleman when he became convinced that he was shut in with a newly-married couple knew no bounds.

He darted at them angry glances over his newspaper ;

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

he coughed ; he fidgeted ; it was evident that he considered he had been inveigled into this position under false pretenses, and looked upon their presence as not less than a breach of the by-laws of the railway company.

The consequence was that the young people took refuge in a silence which was full of suppressed merriment, and that Peter changed his seat, and once more took the corner facing Nannie, "so that he may be quite sure," as he explained in a whisper, "that I shan't be able to kiss you when he isn't looking."

The result of this little incident and the fun they had over it was that they were merry rather than sentimental for the greater part of the way, that Nannie laughed till she cried when their traveling companion got out, and that she told Peter ingenuously when at last, tired and sleepy, she let him hand her out of the train at Torquay, that she had never enjoyed a journey so much in her life.

Peter looked at her with a smile full of wistful affection. He knew that his bride was still more child than woman, knew even that he had never seen her except under the shadow of some influence, now her own mother's, now Miss Pemberton's, which had checked the free development of her nature. He asked himself anxiously whether she would be as happy with him as she was capable of being, whether he should be able to keep that girlish smile on her face and yet see in her eyes some day—soon—the tender love of the wife and the woman ?

Peter quite understood that, with an increasing business, and with the full determination he had to devote

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

himself to it unremittingly, he should not soon be able to take another holiday. Indeed he had never before taken more than two or three days, for a visit to London, in which he combined business with a little recreation.

Now, however, he meant to signalize the attainment of his heart's wish—his marriage with Nannie—by a real, unalloyed holiday ; so he had made arrangements to have six clear weeks, of which he proposed to spend half in Devonshire and half abroad.

Whatever anticipations of enjoyment he may have formed beforehand were more than fulfilled by the happiness of these weeks ; they formed a shining epoch in his life, upon which he never ceased to look back with comfort and delight.

Conscientious, unimaginative, and steadfast to do the thing his hand found to do, Peter had passed the ten years of his life, from eighteen to eight-and-twenty, first at daily, unceasing work in his father's office, and after that father's death in the painstaking and successful endeavor to take his place and to fill it honorably and worthily. During all that time he had not been specially attracted by any particular woman, and had had, indeed, rather a low opinion of such members of the sex of his own generation as came in his way.

He had, therefore, the pent-up passion of ten years of youth to add enthusiasm to his love ; and he lavished upon the wife who fulfilled every conscious and unconscious ideal of his heart a devotion not more deep than it was unselfish, not more generous than it was lasting.

He asked no extravagant devotion in return ; the beauty and freshness which had made him for the first time captive to woman's charm not unnaturally seemed

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

to him so superlative that to demand as much from its possessor as he was himself willing to give would have appeared too exacting. He was, besides, perhaps, sufficiently behind the times to take what is now an old-fashioned view of the relations between man and woman, and would have been a little shocked if his bride had expressed her feelings and sentiments towards him with the freedom of the typical modern woman.

It followed, therefore, that he was more than satisfied with Nannie's attitude of passive and somewhat timid affection; that he found the charm of modesty where another might have complained of coldness, and asked from her no more than that she should accept his tenderness, treat him with affection, and—be happy.

All these requirements Nannie fulfilled perfectly. She, too, had passed through no experiences of the heart, having, indeed, lived in almost conventual seclusion, undisturbed by the breath of a passing flirtation, until her visit to Bredinsbury.

But this absence of a novitiate in love had, of course, produced different results in the girl of eighteen from those it brought about in the man of eight-and-twenty. Such visions of love as had been present in her young girl's dreams had been of the airy and vague sort which a breath of reality blows away; and Peter's ardent affection, while it frightened her and made her feel that he would tire of her when he found her commonplace and unresponsive, did indeed, in these early days, seem to her a little wearisome.

"If I were as good or as beautiful as he thinks me," she said to herself, with that feminine clearness of vision which sees well a very little way, "I shouldn't mind so

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

much. But I'm not, and he'll find it out, and be disappointed, and perhaps be sorry he married me."

Whether she quite believed this herself or not, she certainly found it difficult to listen to Peter's whispered rhapsodies as sympathetically as she felt she ought ; his reiterated assurances that she was the loveliest creature in the world in his eyes bored her ; she was glad he liked to kiss her, but—she grew tired of being kissed.

With all this she thought it was because she was so fond of Peter that she was sorry he should use up in a few weeks the love which ought to have been spread out over a period of years. This was the way the ignorant little child-woman put the matter to herself, with an odd belief in her own wisdom and shrewdness.

And in the meantime, whatever might be her secret feelings, she took care not to show by a word or a sign that the days which were of cloudless, unalloyed happiness to her husband contained any less measure of content to her. Indeed, she was happy too. Peter was so good, so kind, so sympathetic and good-humored, that he was the sweetest of companions ; he turned white and trembled in every limb one day when she had cut her finger by the careless use of a pen-knife ; he watched her face, her every gesture, and knew at once when the elasticity of her footsteps began to give place to the first symptom of fatigue, when he would instantly insist upon her resting before they went on again, or in putting her into a fly if one were within hail.

She was his treasure, his pearl, his delight ; the very sum of possible human bliss had come to him, finding vent in a murmur which thrilled Nannie through and through with a sense of responsibility and awe, as he

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

laid his head on her shoulder one evening, when they had come in, tired, from their walk, and were watching the sunset side by side :

“ Oh, God, I’m so happy ! ”

The words rang in her ears that night ; and she told herself, with the tears rising to her eyes, that she would spare no pains to do her duty, and to maintain in the future what it was so easy to secure in the present—the happiness of a husband whom she respected as well as loved.

It was curious that, with all her mistakes and illusions, this inexperienced girl should understand and foresee better, far better than the man did.

They were coming to the end of their stay at Torquay when Peter got a letter summoning him to London on business. He was inconsolable at the necessity of leaving her alone for a few hours, although she laughed at him and told him he must really be glad of the change. It was impossible to put off the matter, as it was Lord Thanington who wished to see him, and such a summons, coming at a time when the earl was staying at his town house, meant too much to the young solicitor for him to be able to neglect it.

“ Of course,” he said to Nannie, “ it would not seem so important if he had been at Greyfriars and had just sent into the town to me. But for him to write down to Bredinsbury to me when he is in town, looks as if he really meant to give me some of his business. And I dare say you know what that means, in a country place where everybody knows everything. If he takes me up, everybody else will.”

Nannie was duly impressed with this, and she saw

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

him off at the station with her best wishes for the success of his errand. She could not help being touched by the solicitude in his eyes as he leaned out of the carriage window to see the last of her, as if he had been going to America at least. But the truth was that, however he might regret the loss of one day of his honeymoon, Nannie, though she would not own it even to herself, enjoyed the respite from his demonstrative devotion immensely, even while she tried to persuade herself that she missed him very much.

After a day quite as happy as any she had spent at Torquay, Nannie went dutifully down to the station in the evening to meet her husband on his return, and to receive the sort of greeting she might have expected if he had been half a year at the Antipodes.

He was bursting over with his news, but first there was a most important inquiry to be made.

"Have you missed me, darling?" whispered he as they walked back together towards their lodging.

"Why, of course I have," answered Nannie, promptly.

"Not as much as I have missed you," said he, bending his head to look affectionately into her eyes. "I've never known a day so long, and yet it's been a grand day too—in one way. Lord Thanington was awfully kind, and congratulated me in the nicest way. He says he must give us a wedding present. Fancy that! Won't Aunt Ellen be proud?"

"Yes, I suppose she will," said Nannie.

"And it seems as if he was really going to give me a lot of work," went on Peter. "And he says Lady Joanna will call upon you as soon as we get back. So our smart furniture will be seen by somebody after all,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

and not wasted, as poor Aunt Ellen said it would be."

Nannie laughed, but she did not feel altogether at ease. She liked Lord Thanington, and she thought Greyfriars the most beautiful place in the world. But young as she was, she foresaw difficulties in the possibility of such an action as that proposed. She had already gathered that there is an immense gulf between the lives of country professional men and their wives on the one hand and the county families on the other. And although she said nothing about her fears to Peter, who, simple fellow, would have understood nothing about them, and although she told herself that these words of the earl's might have been uttered in mere civility, yet she could not dispossess her mind of the belief that she would find life in the old house with the gables a more complex thing than she was prepared for.

CHAPTER XI.

If Peter was happy at Torquay, it was Nannie's turn to learn something of perfect bliss when they got to Paris.

The original program had been drawn up with a view to get still further afield, to penetrate into Switzerland, and to return by way of Antwerp and Ghent, two old towns which Peter wanted to see.

But Nannie's extravagant delight in the gay capital caused an alteration in the plan.

"What are mountains after the Boulevard des Italiens and the Rue de la Paix?" as Nannie plaintively asked.

Indeed, to a young woman who has spent her eighteen years of life under the pall of Preston smoke, Paris, with its shops and its theaters, its bright lights and its gay crowds, could be nothing less than enchanting. Peter would have been quite content to pass the rest of their holiday in Devonshire, but he could not fail to be happy when Nannie was happy, though her crazy delight in these new experiences startled as well as amused him.

He was surprised to find how much more fatigue she could bear in this new atmosphere than in the enervating repose of Torquay. Whereas a short walk over the cliffs had been enough to tire her, her energy was indefatigable in traversing picture-galleries and churches, museums and streets. Her delight in all she saw

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

seemed to endow her with fictitious strength, and Peter often told her that he got tired first.

Of course they went out to Versailles and St. Germain, St. Cloud, and Vincennes, and other places in the environs. But it was the city of pleasure itself, with its crowds and its sparkle, that was Nannie's delight ; and Peter, even if he felt a little regret that she did not share his own preference for the stately quiet of St. Germain, for the pleasant loneliness of the woods, and the walks where they had only each other for diversion, was ready to humor her, and to find his own pleasure in hers.

It was while they were looking in at the window of a milliner's one day that Peter suddenly said :

" You'd like a new hat, wouldn't you ? Every woman who comes to Paris buys a bonnet there."

Nannie's eyes sparkled, but she was wise enough to restrain Peter as he was proceeding to enter the milliner's door.

" No," said she, with feminine caution, " not in here. I'm sure this is a very expensive place. Let's ask at the hotel where we ought to go. I should like a hat from Paris very much, but I shouldn't like you to have to pay a great deal of money for it, when you've spent so much on me already."

Peter could not but recognize the wisdom of these words, and the wife of the proprietor of the modest hotel where they were staying confirmed Nannie's words. The good woman interested herself in the pretty little English bride, and directed them to a house where, as she explained quite truthfully, Nannie would be able to get anything she wanted in the way of costume at about a fourth of the price Peter would have had to pay if he

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

had followed his man's instinct of rushing into the smartest shop he saw.

When Peter insisted on buying her a new dress as well as a smart hat for the cricket week, and a bonnet for church, Nannie felt that the joy of existence must have reached its climax. She had had no idea she had so much vanity until she tried on her smart new frock, which was of some silver-gray, silky material with big bows of black velvet, and a hat which made a charming frame for her fresh young face.

"I'm glad your aunt isn't here," she said, laughing to Peter, as he put his arm round her and told her she was a vain little thing. "I shouldn't like her to see how pleased I am!"

Peter laughed too.

"Well, now I shall know how to keep you in good humor. When you get tired of me I can always earn your good-will by bringing you home a new bonnet."

Nannie laughed a little half-heartedly, and looked rather grave.

"I think I wish you hadn't bought me these beautiful things," she said very seriously. "I've never had the opportunity of knowing how much I should care for dress. But I begin to think it would grow upon me very soon to care a great deal—too much, in fact."

The puritan was struggling with the natural woman in Nannie. Peter passed his hand tenderly over the dark head, from which she had removed her beautiful new headgear rather hastily.

"I like to see you look nice. I like my wife to be beautiful," said he, in a whisper.

"My wife!" How often he found occasion to repeat

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

those words during a day : they sent a thrill from his lips to his heart still. The tears came to Nannie's eyes, as they did suddenly sometimes when, in the midst of the excitement of the pleasure she was enjoying, a deep sense of Peter's love and what it had brought to her seized her suddenly.

" But I don't deserve it all," she said hurriedly, in a low voice. " And I always feel that you'll find it out some day, and be surprised you could ever have cared for me so much. Miss Pemberton's opinion of me is right, not yours. You don't or you won't, see my faults. I'm afraid the discovery of them will come some day with a rush."

Peter smiled and went on stroking her head.

" And how about mine ? " said he, quietly.

Nannie turned to stare up in his face.

" I don't believe you have any," she said, quite simply.

" Then, if you think that," said he, more gravely, " I'm afraid there's a surprise waiting for you too."

Nannie was astonished by his solemn tone, and she looked away from his face with a certain momentary timidity.

" Why, what *are* your faults ? " she asked presently, still without looking at him.

And Peter's tone was as solemn as ever as he answered:

" Why, the fault of Beelzebub, in the first place—pride, stubborn, unflinching pride."

" And what else ? "

" Well, I think that'll do to begin with," said Peter, his face relaxing as he felt her little fingers on his sleeve ; " besides, it's the root of them all, isn't it ? "

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

“Well, it’s something to have only one fault ; I have lots,” said Nannie.

But Peter smiled, and patted her shoulder, and said he shouldn’t worry himself about them till they grew positively unbearable.

Indeed, if there were imperfections on either side, they interfered wonderfully little with the happiness of an unusually successful honeymoon.

And when Peter and his wife arrived at Bredinsbury one June evening, and hurried quietly into the wonderful old house around which Peter had built so many hopes, their future seemed to smile upon the young couple as pleasantly as the warm summer sun shone upon their heads.

Peter had his key, so they let themselves in like a pair of mice, and shut themselves into the soft gloom of the evening with blinking eyes still dazzled by the bright beams outside.

Peter was almost too much excited to speak. So many of the emotions he had felt about his marriage had connected themselves with this old house ; he had felt a thrill, a throb over the purchase of each separate piece of furniture. For every chair, every table reminded him either of some fancy of Nannie’s, or of some picture he had formed in his mind with her for the central figure.

“It—it seems too good to be true,” said he, hoarsely, “that you’re here, that I’ve got you, that it’s all come out as I wanted it to ! Come, come in here !”

He grasped her arm with a tremulous hand as he unlocked the door on the right and drew her into a transformed, transfigured apartment, where, in the soft

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

light of the drawn blinds, Nannie could discern some of the treasures her husband had been gathering for her.

“ Oh ! oh, Peter, what have you done to the place ? It's not the same ! It's—it's beautiful ! ”

Nannie uttered these broken ejaculations while Peter drew up the blinds and showed her how he had had two rooms thrown into one, the wood paneling cleared of its disfiguring paint, the floor stained and carpeted, the rusty old grate replaced by a modern one with pretty tiles, and the winged armchairs she loved scattered about the room.

“ And look, look, here's your writing-table ! ” cried he, in triumph, as he pointed out a pretty little piece of furniture, which was, as he had said, very like Lady Joanna's.

They were like two children as they made their tour of inspection. Peter in all the dignity and pride of his purchases, Nannie in fresh ecstasies with every separate thing. It had been Peter's suggestion that they should steal home quietly without giving notice of their arrival, and this involved all the pleasures of a picnic among the grand new things, instead of a more prosaic meal.

Then Peter and Nannie left the big house to pay Miss Pemberton a surprise visit, which was not more of a success than surprise visits usually are. For the good lady had been helping Hannah to turn out one of the up-stairs rooms, and had put on a particularly rusty old dress for this work. The meeting with Nannie, who had put on her new French hat for the occasion, was, therefore, not so cordial on the elder lady's side as might have been wished.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Miss Pemberton said tart things about the necessity of making the best of old clothes and old furniture, and regretted Peter's decision not to take Hannah into his service, but to leave the old servant with his aunt, and to engage two new girls to do the work of the new house.

She supposed, however, that even Nannie would not be too grand to be glad of Hannah's assistance that night, since she understood that the new servants were not to come until the following morning.

Peter and Nannie thanked her, and availed themselves of the offer, and soon, feeling that they were in the way, rose to go.

Miss Pemberton had not failed to take particular notice of the bride's headgear, and at that she directed her parting shot.

"I hope you won't mind my mentioning it, dear," she remarked, with her eyes fixed upon the confection of black chip and tulle and feathers of which Nannie and her husband were so proud, "but what extraordinary things they wear on their heads in Preston!"

Her malice was a little overdone, for Peter burst out laughing, though Nannie looked half angry, half rueful.

"Now, aunt, you know better than that," he said, as he laid a comforting hand on his bride's shoulder. "That's not Preston, but Paris; and I'm much mistaken if you're not woman enough to know the difference."

Miss Pemberton raised her eyebrows, but she had the grace to redden a little. Nannie, however, was too angry to speak again. She merely bowed, having already said good-by, and went down the steps.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Spiteful old thing!" she whispered indignantly to Peter, as they crossed the road together. "Of course she knew. How can she be so disagreeable! She almost makes me hate her!"

"No, no, don't say that," urged Peter, earnestly. "You must make allowance for the fact that she's been spoilt; she's had it all her own way, first with my father and then with me, for ever so many years, and, if I may use the expression your coming has 'put her nose out of joint.'"

"She has no right to be so nasty about it, though," said Nannie, sharply. "She couldn't suppose you were going to remain unmarried all your life because of her, and I don't think you've been so much unhappier with me than you were with her!"

"That's the hard part of it to bear, I dare say. But I can never be grateful enough to her for letting you come at all."

"She wouldn't have let me come if she could have helped it," retorted Nannie. "You know that. She tried to make mischief between us the very first evening."

"Well, well, you must forgive and forget. For I can tell you that, if you were ever to be in any trouble or distress (which God forbid!)" he added fervently, "nobody would be so ready to help you, or to be kind to you, as poor old Aunt Ellen."

"I'm sure I hope I shall never have to put her to the test," cried Nannie, with decision.

Her views on this point were still further strengthened by the attitude Miss Pemberton took when she was formally invited, at the end of the first week of Nannie's housekeeping, to come and see the house.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

She would not come at all until this formal invitation was given, and Peter and Nannie had their first slight wrangle—it could not be called a quarrel, for they both laughed so much about it—over the necessity for inviting her at all.

Nannie said his aunt would only make herself disagreeable; and Peter said that, disagreeable or not, she must come. So, more furniture having been bought and brought in, in the meantime, of Nannie's own choice, and Peter and Nannie and the two good-humored little country servants having all worked like galley-slaves to make everything look its best, Peter took himself off to the office, as the little house was now to be called, and begged his aunt to give him and Nannie the pleasure of coming to take tea with them and to see over the house.

Miss Pemberton coughed grimly.

"Pleasure!" she said. "That was not Anne's message, I suppose."

"Oh, yes, it was, aunt. I think she told me to say 'great pleasure,'" persisted Peter, mendaciously.

"Then she's a little hypocrite," was Miss Pemberton's prompt and rather crushing reply.

However, of course, she accepted the invitation, and equally, of course, she revenged herself for what she considered an undue delay in inviting her by being pleased with nothing whatever. She remarked on the "pokiness" of the entrance hall, upon the darkness of the large inner hall behind, and even the drawing-room, which Nannie and her husband already looked upon as a triumph, evoked nothing from her but the coldest criticism. She affected to take no notice of

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

anything in the room until Peter, bursting with impatience, boldly asked for her opinion.

"Oh, my dear Peter, the opinion of an old-fashioned creature like me isn't worth having," said she, allowing her eyes to roam in a certain threatening manner round the large apartment; "of course these little bits of carpet that don't come up to the doors or windows are quite right, and in the fashion, but they don't seem to keep the rooms as warm as the old ones that went into the corners."

"Ah, but I had the cracks in the floor stopped up," said Peter, triumphantly. "But come now, don't you like this high-backed settee, and those cozy-looking chairs?"

"Of course they're quite the right thing, or you wouldn't have them," she replied promptly, "but I own to liking my things to match. Chairs and sofas and curtains all the same color, and a carpet to harmonize with them. But that's out of date, I suppose?"

"Well, it is a little, aunt."

"They have the furniture like this at Greyfriars," put in Nannie, as it proved, most injudiciously.

For Miss Pemberton turned upon her in a moment.

"At Greyfriars!" she cried in amazement. "But surely you don't propose to model the way you live upon what they do at the earl's place?"

"We couldn't follow a better model, in our humbler way, as regards furnishing, aunt," said Peter, coming quickly to his young wife's rescue.

But though he managed to check her objections at this point, she had plenty more in reserve. Before she had gone over the whole house she had fully impressed

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

the young couple with her conviction that, in changing houses, they had changed for the worse, and that the number of as yet empty and unfurnished rooms would make the place draughty, while when they had filled them the servants would either neglect their work or leave in disgust at the amount of it.

If Nannie was downcast, in spite of Peter's consolations, over her failure to impress her first visitor, the enthusiasm of her second caller amply made amends.

On the very day after Miss Pemberton's state visit Nannie was spending the afternoon in the happiest manner, arranging and rearranging the furniture in her pretty drawing-room, when Shirley Brede was announced. He had come down from town to Greyfriars on an errand for Lord Thanington, he said, and hearing that the bride and bridegroom had come back from their travels he thought he must come in and see how they were getting on.

"What an awfully jolly place you've got here!" said he, admiringly, glancing from the walls to the beautiful latticed window, which was the young couple's great pride. "And how charmingly you've got it up! Just the right things! Though of course you would do that."

"It wasn't I who chose them," said Nannie, delighted at his admiration, which carried off the slightly awkward feeling she had had when he was announced.

"Wasn't it? Was it Pemberton's doing? Fancy old Peter coming down like this!"

And he gave another smiling glance round the room, while Nannie drew herself up.

"He has excellent taste," said she, coldly.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

But Shirley turned round upon her like lightning.

"Of course he has! You needn't tell me *that*, Mrs. Pemberton. Peter knows a good thing when he sees it, as we all know."

"And I really don't know why you should speak of him as 'old Peter.' He isn't at all old for one thing, and nobody's allowed to call him 'Peter' but me."

"I beg your pardon." Shirley's apology was made very simply, naturally and well. "You're quite right. It was an impertinence. But you'll forgive me, I hope. I'm always doing the wrong thing, you know, and I'm forgiven because I'm always treated—I'm sure I don't know why—as an irresponsible creature, little better than half-witted."

It was impossible not to be mollified, and Nannie smiled.

"I don't think that's a very happy excuse," said she. "That wasn't at all the impression of you which I noticed at Greyfriars."

"When you've been there a little oftener you'll notice it!" he exclaimed, with a burlesque sigh.

And before he had well got over the sigh the door opened and Miss Pemberton came in.

Nannie guessed the truth at once. Miss Pemberton had seen Shirley Brede ride past, and had dashed on her bonnet and come over to discover whether he had come into Bredinsbury to call upon Peter's wife. There was a sort of triumphant glare in her eyes when they lighted on him which betrayed her.

Nannie introduced Shirley, who rattled on in his usual fashion while she rang for the tea.

"I consider," said he, as he turned to the visitor,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

“that Mr. Pemberton”—here he gave Nannie a wicked little glance to emphasize his respectful style in speaking of her husband—“has laid the whole county under a great obligation in marrying Mrs. Pemberton and thereby keeping her among us.”

Miss Pemberton replied stiffly enough. She considered this sort of talk “flowery,” and unwholesome for a young wife’s ears.

“I can’t see that,” she said. “The position of a solicitor’s wife does not bring her into much contact with the county people.”

“Not an ordinary solicitor’s wife, perhaps,” retorted Shirley, airily, “one of those dear, good ladies who wear dolmans, and who always have a black bonnet with a red flower in it to go to church in on Sundays.”

This remark was peculiarly unfortunate, as Miss Pemberton happened to have such a bonnet in her wardrobe. While she wondered vaguely what could be considered wrong in such an eminently suitable style of headgear, she naturally resented the observation.

“It’s not a mere matter of clothes,” she said. “Nannie would soon ruin her husband’s business if she began to put on airs of wearing things above her station, and aping the manners and tastes of a rank above her.”

“Oh, but there’s no rank above that of a charming woman!” persisted the reckless Shirley. “I’m so thankful Mr. Pemberton brought his wife home before Greyfriars is open for the shooting season. Poor Thanington’s got to have a succession of dreadful old ladies there this autumn. There’s a marchioness who was maid of honor to Queen Charlotte”—Miss Pem-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

berton opened her eyes, and he rattled on—"or somebody else who's in Madame Tussand's. We've simply been all in a state of blue funk as to what we should do to keep ourselves alive. Mrs. Pemberton's coming is a godsend."

Miss Pemberton listened with mingled disapproval and consternation which were but too apparent in her faint protests, in her shocked silences. Nannie was half frightened, half amused, and altogether the time passed uncomfortably until Shirley rose to go. He had tried to outstay the rigid spinster, but his determination was as water compared to hers.

He affected to have a message to deliver to Nannie's private ear; but when she accompanied him into the hall to hear it, shutting Miss Pemberton for a minute into the drawing-room with an apology, she found Shirley purple in the face, stuffing his handkerchief into his mouth, and writhing in uncontrollable fits of laughter.

CHAPTER XII.

NANNIE tried in vain to look prim.

The humor of that scene during tea, the starched attitude and manner of Miss Pemberton, the ever-increasing suppressed hilarity of Shirley, had indeed tried her own powers of self-repression to the utmost. She drew herself up and asked him what was the matter, but she had to look away to hide a smile.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! She's too lovely! Miss Pemberton's quite too awfully delicious for anything! I wish Thanington had been here! Oh, no wonder Peter—I beg your pardon, I mean Pemberton—no wonder he wanted to get married! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

And Shirley tried in vain to control his laughter.

"I don't think there's anything to laugh at," said Nannie, gravely. "She's a very good woman——"

"Good! I never doubted it! But even goodness ought to have limits, you know! But I'm sorry I laughed, since you like her so much."

Nannie said nothing. She felt that she did not like her husband's aunt, that she only tried to. Shirley was outside the door now, standing beside his horse, with one foot in the stirrup. As he turned with a last word, he caught sight, as Nannie did also, of Miss Pemberton glaring at them both through the curtains. He raised his hat to the spinster, who withdrew at once, evidently disturbed at having been seen; and Shirley

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

rode away, while Nannie, highly incensed, returned to the drawing-room.

Good as Miss Pemberton's intentions towards her and Peter undoubtedly were, it was certain that she had adopted the surest way to destroy her own influence with the young wife at least. No elderly spinster ever cares to acknowledge the superiority which marriage at once gives to a young woman, who, from the moment that she becomes a wife, has not only her own arms, heart and intellect to rely upon, but the arms, the heart and the intellect of an enthusiastic champion.

Miss Pemberton, therefore, making the usual mistake of assuming the lofty position of a privileged critic, began an attack upon Shirley Brede the moment Nannie reentered the drawing-room.

"I'm really surprised, Anne, that you care to receive such a man as that in your house," she said tartly, with a heightened color. "Of course I'd often heard of him as an undesirable person, but I had no idea he was so vulgar. 'Blue funk' indeed! I suppose he thinks himself entitled to use, in the presence of women who are not of high rank, expressions which would shock a lady like Lady Joanna."

"They use a good deal of slang at Greyfriars, Miss Pemberton," said Nannie, who had not yet been able to follow her husband's suggestion that she should call the stern spinster "aunt." "Even Lady Joanna herself does. And as for Lady Violet——"

She did not finish the sentence, but, even if she had done so, her words would have produced but little effect upon Miss Pemberton, who simply did not believe her.

"I can't think what people can see in him to rave

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

about his good looks either," went on Nannie's visitor, superciliously. "His eyes are too small, and his chin sticks out too much. And I never can admire a man who wears no mustache."

"Why, Peter doesn't wear one!" cried Nannie, open-eyed.

Miss Pemberton frowned, annoyed at having been "caught out."

"Peter's different. He has a fine face that will bear looking into, not one disfigured by evil passions," said she.

Now this again was an unfortunate remark; for, whatever Shirley Brede's moral character might be, it was certain that the dominant expression of his whole face, with its laughing blue eyes, was one of youthful merriment and a sort of boyish joy in life which, though belated in a man over thirty, was perfectly natural in him and undeniably attractive.

"Well; whatever we may think of his appearance," said Nannie after a short pause, "I couldn't refuse to see a friend of Lord Thanington's, could I, especially when he came from Greyfriars to see me? But if you really think I ought to tell the servants I'm not at home to the people I met at Greyfriars, you had better ask Peter what he thinks about it."

Miss Pemberton rose to go.

"I think I shouldn't boast about your acquaintances there until the ladies begin to call upon you," she said grimly. "That's the real compliment; I've always understood that gentlemen's visits don't count when they come by themselves."

This was a parting shot which only succeeded in em-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

bittering Nannie, who could not but feel that she had done nothing to deserve a speech of this sort.

Poor Peter, when he got outside his office door that afternoon, was pounced upon by his aunt, who had lain in wait for him, with warnings as to allowing his young wife to receive gentlemen in his absence.

"When I called there this afternoon I found that Mr. Brede there, laughing and talking to her. And you know how people speak of him!"

Peter frowned, and answered rather shortly. He was not wholly pleased to hear of Shirley Brede's prompt attentions, but, on the other hand, he had far too much good sense to play the jealous husband upon such short notice.

"Oh! our quiet townspeople 'speak' of everybody who doesn't do exactly as they do," said he. "Everybody calls upon my wife," he added with pride which he did not attempt to conceal. "The exception is not to call; and it would never do for her to be anything but civil to Lord Thanington's friends."

"Oh, of course, if you're satisfied I've nothing to say," said his aunt, stiffly.

"I'm quite satisfied that what my wife does is the right thing, though I appreciate your thoughtfulness for us both, aunt," said he.

When he got home, and was met by Nannie, who gave him a full and laughable description of the afternoon's events, he felt considerable vexation at the absurd part his aunt had played, and a strong temptation to give her "a piece of his mind" about it. From this course, however, he was dissuaded by Nannie, who told him rather shrewdly, but with some slight acrimony

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

too, that he would have plenty more opportunities for that. She already foresaw some prospect of a constant succession of little worries for poor Peter, who would be assailed by his aunt in the one house with constant criticisms of his wife in the other.

Nearly a fortnight passed after Shirley Brede's visit before Nannie heard anything more about the earl and his "set," except that Greyfriars had been reopened for the autumn visit. But in the meantime her time was so fully occupied in receiving and returning the calls of the ladies of Bredinsbury that she had little occasion for troubling her head with conjectures as to the amount of her future intercourse with the great house.

Peter was proud and happy to find that many ladies who had never troubled their heads about him or his aunt now hastened to call upon his wife, who had no reason to complain that her pretty drawing-room was what Miss Pemberton called, "a useless extravagance!"

But all these courtesies paled in significance when the great day came upon which Lady Joanna, in a dowdy black and white muslin dress and an unbecoming bonnet, drove up in the Greyfriars' landau and made her formal call upon young Mrs. Pemberton.

Nannie was delighted, more because she knew that Peter would be than because she felt any prospect of pleasure in Lady Joanna's visit. The visitor was, indeed, cold, critical and matter-of-fact, as usual. She admired the house—coldly, made some useful suggestions about harmony of color and arrangements of drapery, recommended a particular furniture polish, all of which advice

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

would have been more welcome if it had been given in a more amiable manner.

But Lady Joanna drank her cup of tea and made her remarks, as she did most things, without a smile, and in the mechanical manner habitual to her. It was not until she had risen to go that she turned back on the way to the door to say, over her shoulder, in an off-hand way :

"Oh, by the bye, my father told me to ask you to come to luncheon to-morrow."

"Thank you," said Nannie. "It's very kind of you. But I think I'd rather not come."

She spoke with considerable hesitancy of manner, and was annoyed to find what clumsy words she had used to express her meaning. Lady Joanna stopped short, in manifest surprise, and turned to look at her.

"Do you mean that?" she asked abruptly. "That you'd rather not come to Greyfriars?"

Nannie clasped her hands nervously, and answered, without looking up :

"I don't mean that I don't think it very good of you and the earl to ask me," she said in a low voice, but in a tone which showed that she spoke after due consideration. "It's very kind indeed. But I do think—— You see, there's a great difference between you and me, and—and—I think I'd rather just stay quietly here and get my husband's luncheon ready as usual."

"You are very domestic!" said Lady Joanna, with a smile at last, though it was rather a mocking one. "However, of course you know best what you ought to do. I'll tell my father you don't care to come."

And she marched out of the room, not with any air

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

of being offended, but as if dryly amused at the young wife's absurd whim.

Nannie felt horribly frightened, and wondered what Peter would say. Had she done something stupid, something irrevocable? Would Lord Thanington be even more astonished than Lady Joanna was by her airs of independence? It occurred to her that she ought not to have taken such a decided step as was involved in her refusal to accept an invitation which had been thrown to her as a condescension and a command without consulting her husband.

The poor child was almost in tears when she ran to meet Peter as he came home at six o'clock from the office. If she had not already made it a rule not to disturb him at his work, she would have put on her hat and taken his opinion without a moment's delay. But they had both agreed that it would be better for her not to interrupt him during business hours, and there was always the danger that, even if she were to break through this rule, she might be pounced upon by Miss Pemberton.

"Oh, Peter, I've done something so dreadful!" was her greeting, uttered in a voice husky with anxiety, as Peter stooped to give her his kiss of greeting.

"Why, what's that, darling? Dropped some ink upon the pretty writing-table? Tried to make a pudding and dismally failed?"

"No, no, no. You don't understand. It's something really wrong, and I don't know what you'll say," said she, as she followed him into the inner hall with a frightened face.

He put his arm around her, ran lightly up the few

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

stairs that led to the dining-room, and entering it, drew her upon his knee.

“Come and confess your misdeeds, then, and I’ll judge whether they’re too bad to be forgiven.”

“Well, they are ; I believe you’ll say they are,” cried Nannie, who had had time, since Lady Joanna’s departure, to work herself up into a fever of anxiety. “I’ve—I’ve refused an invitation to Greyfriars.”

Peter did not look shocked or angry, but he did indeed look mightily astonished at this admission.

“Good gracious !” cried he. “What did you do it for ?”

“Well, Peter, Lady Joanna asked me as if she didn’t want me to come. And—and I think it made me a little angry, for one thing ; for after all I’ve never asked to go there, have I ? But now what I want to know is this : I don’t care a bit whether Lady Joanna’s offended or not ; but do you think Lord Thanington will be angry and won’t give you any more of his business to do ?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think he’d do that,” said Peter. “But still I’m rather sorry you refused. These people don’t expect to have to treat us exactly as they do their own equals, you know, and to give formal written invitations. What did she say ?”

“She just said, over her shoulder, so”—and Nannie imitated Lady Joanna’s cool effrontery perfectly—“that Lord Thanington said she was to ask me to go to luncheon to-morrow. Me, without you, mind !”

“Well, of course I couldn’t have gone in any case, and it would have been only an affectation to ask me. I’m rather sorry you said no, child, for your sake. For

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

I don't suppose she will ask you again, and you know you enjoyed yourself the last time."

"Ah, well, then I was only a little girl from nowhere. Now I'm your wife!"

And, still on Peter's knee, Nannie drew herself up very prettily and earned another kiss.

"Well, I don't suppose for a moment any other harm will come of it than your loss of a little pleasure now and then; for perhaps they'd have taken you for a drive sometimes, and given you an invitation to see the theatricals they have there in October."

"I'm sure I don't want to see their theatricals," said Nannie, superbly. "Now I've been in the Paris theaters, these things would seem very tame."

Peter roared with laughter at these *blasé* airs, and pinched her cheeks, and told her that pride would have a fall, and that she would not like it when she heard of all the other ladies in Bredinsbury getting invitations when she was left out. But though Nannie looked a little troubled by this gloomy forecast, she would not own that she felt any distress; and when the whole story unluckily got to Miss Pemberton's ears, and that lady overflowed with indignation and prophesied that Peter's wife would be the ruin of his business, Nannie bore her stately reproaches with studied calmness, and only said meekly that, since Peter had not been angry with her, she thought she had done no great harm.

Miss Pemberton, however, would not let the subject drop. She did not indeed see Nannie herself often enough to worry her much about it, but whenever she met her nephew, which was some four or five times a day, she never forgot to remind him, by some look or

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

allusion, of the appalling and dangerous lack of tact in his wife.

It was about ten days after Lady Joanna's visit, and Miss Pemberton had not yet got over her indignation and despair, when Peter presented himself before her one morning, and with an air of triumph which he tried to subdue, laid before her astonished eyes a formal invitation, for himself and Nannie, to a dinner at Greyfriars in a fortnight's time.

His aunt affected at first not to be sure that the invitation was really for them. But there could be no serious mistake about that. Then there was a long pause, which she suddenly broke by an abrupt question :

“What will she wear?”

“The prettiest dress that can be made in the time,” replied Peter, promptly. “She shall be as well dressed as anybody there.”

Miss Pemberton shrugged her shoulders.

“I hope you won't think me unkind,” she said, “but if anything was wanting to complete the spoiling of your wife, it was this. How do you suppose she will settle down quietly to ordinary home life after such a departure from her usual habits? She will look upon herself as on a level with Lady Joanna herself.”

“She won't do anything so silly,” said Peter, quietly, but with that old note of obstinacy which was always the danger-signal Miss Pemberton respected. “Can't you see, aunt, by this invitation, that she knows what is the right thing to do better than you or I do? If she had taken Lady Joanna's invitation, which was no invitation, and had gone to luncheon when she evidently

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

wasn't wanted, we should certainly never have got asked in this grand way. And I think you must see for yourself that she will not be the hindrance to me that you suggested."

Miss Pemberton bit her lip. Nannie's brilliant beginning affected her with a strange mixture of antagonism and admiration. She was loath to confess that the "little bit of a girl" whom she had looked down upon was really taking her place as a social success on a small scale, while on the other hand she did not fail to make capital in her own modest circle out of Peter's improving position, though she took care not to allow that this was in any way attributable to his marriage.

When the long-looked-for evening came, Miss Pemberton could not, of course, forego the excitement of seeing Nannie in her new dress before she started. And even she had to admit, in a grudging manner, that Peter's wife looked well in the smart new frock which she had had made in London—oh, dear, yes, nothing in Bredinsbury was good enough for Peter—in honor of the occasion.

The dress, which was the first of the kind that Nannie had ever worn, was of white satin, of a creamy shade, made very plainly, with a little train. Long sleeves of rucked white tulle covered without concealing her arms, and filled in the low-cut bodice. A handsome trimming, of white sequins of a pearly tint, shimmered over the bodice, and fell in long points over the upper part of the skirt ; while a huge bow of black velvet, embedded in a puff of white tulle, stood up high and stiff on the left shoulder, giving the only touch of relief to the whole.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"How do you like her dress, aunt?" asked Peter, in that very subdued manner which one can afford to assume when one is conscious of a huge triumph.

"Oh, it's very fanciful and odd, but no doubt it's all right. Is that what they call mourning nowadays?"

The tears sprang to Nannie's bright eyes, and again Peter made his aunt feel, by a quick look, that she had "put her foot in it."

But probably she meant to.

"It is what I chose for her," he said coldly. "Nannie has other feelings, besides her memories, to consider now."

And he proceeded to wrap his wife in a long white satin cape, with a great ruff of tulle and points of black jet between the puffs, which completed the costume.

"Nobody at Greyfriars will look as lovely as you do," whispered he, with consoling tenderness, when they had got into their modest fly and were on their way to the great house.

That evening was an epoch in the lives of Peter and Nannie. In the first place, the young solicitor had so determined that his wife should look her best, and had so sensibly carried out that resolve, that she not only held her own, but was by far the most admired woman of the party.

Although she wore no jewels, and stood apart in this respect from the other women, her dress was so well chosen, her fresh prettiness so striking, that the absence of gems did but give her a sort of becoming distinction. And although there were present several ladies whose features were more regular and figures more perfect than that of little Nannie, yet the brightness which

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

enjoyment gave to her eyes, the air of thorough, girlish enjoyment which beamed in her face, made her by far the most attractive woman at the long table when they all sat down to dinner.

Peter, with delight and pride, read this verdict in the eyes of his fellow-guests. Above the flowers and the feathery ferns, the face he loved so tenderly seemed to him to shine out of a halo as he cast many a swift glance in her direction. He was afraid of looking at her, afraid that the worshipful admiration in his own heart would shine in his eyes and make the other men smile at his ingenuous pride.

And Nannie, on her side, thought that Peter, who sat on the opposite side of the table, a little way down, looked handsome and dignified in his new clothes, which also had been made expressly for this occasion. She thought how fine his head looked, with the silvery-ashen hair that he wore rather long on the top, and that had such a pretty wave in it. She had no scruples about looking at him, and when she met his eyes she smiled in the very gladness of her heart, even while she chatted away to one or other of the two men between whom she sat.

They laughed often at what she said, Peter noticed, and he was proud of his wife, and proud of himself for being her husband.

Lord Thanington came and talked to her after dinner, and Shirley Brede tried to do so, but could scarcely get a word from her, so much in request was the little bride.

And when they were driving away that night in the moonlight, rumbling in the old fly over the gravel of

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

the long winding drive, Peter said to her, in a voice which was tremulous with love and admiration :

“Why, Nannie, you were splendid ! You talked and—and you laughed, and—you seemed like one of themselves !”

CHAPTER XIII.

NANNIE was delighted with her husband's praises. She was conscious that her first appearance—for so it must be called—had been a success, and that the nervous fears to which she had been a prey beforehand had proved unfounded. She had scarcely given a hint of these fears, but now she made confession, with a sigh of relief.

“ Oh, Peter, I'm so glad it's over ! ”

And she threw back her head and closed her eyes in much contentment. Peter was amazed.

“ Glad it's over ! ” echoed he, stupefied.

“ Why, yes. I couldn't be sure, you know, that they'd be nice to me ! ”

“ Why shouldn't they ? ” asked Peter, hotly. “ Since they asked us, which was not necessary, it was clear that they wanted us, or at least that they wanted you.”

But Nannie, young as she was, understood better than honest Peter.

“ It was Lord Thanington's doing,” she said shrewdly. “ He was nice to us because he wanted to be nice, but Lady Joanna only because she had to be ! ”

Peter, who had noticed none of these shades of meaning in their reception, rather admired his wife's acuteness, even while he half doubted whether she was not supersubtle. Then, after a little puzzled laugh, he suddenly turned to her with some anxiety.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

“Weren’t the ladies nice to you, then, when you were alone with them after dinner?” he asked sharply.

If he had had any fear that Nannie had not been well treated, her bright little chuckle reassured him.

“Oh, yes, much nicer than I expected even. Of course, Lady Joanna is never really nice to anybody; even to Mr. Brede, whom I think she really likes, she’s always short and rather snappish. But she crossed the room to talk to me in that dry, mechanical way of hers, that makes you wish she wouldn’t distress herself by taking so much trouble.”

Peter laughed in appreciation of her criticism, although it was evident that he felt like an unwilling conspirator, and considered anything but respectful praise of the Greyfriars’ people to be either a treason or an impertinence.

“And the others?”

“Oh,” said Nannie, “they were nicer than I had expected too. I had an idea in my own mind that that was by order also.”

“I say, you mustn’t talk like that, you know!” cried Peter, laughing heartily, though somewhat against his will, at her words. “Who would have thought you were such a cynic?”

Nannie looked grave.

“I don’t know why you should call me that,” she said. “But remember, I couldn’t help comparing the way they all treated me to-night with the way they treated me when I went there before. *Then* Lady Cressage, and Mrs. Pontesbury, and especially Lady Violet, scarcely spoke to me at all. To-night they were all nice.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

And I believe it's because I'm your wife, and not because they like me particularly themselves."

"But why should that make any difference?" said Peter. "I'm not a man of great social position, you know!"

"It seems to me," said Nannie, "that Lord Thanington means to treat you as if you were. Perhaps that's the proper thing to do when he gives you so much of his business."

For Peter had of course confided to her the fact that the earl had given him some more work to do during the last fortnight. For some reason, which he did not choose to mention to his wife, Peter grew thoughtful and abrupt after this suggestion of hers. But any discomforting thoughts that he might have had were soon dispelled by his wife's lively chatter about the events of the evening.

"Did you speak to Mrs. Etheling?" asked Peter, with interest. For this old lady was a person of great consequence in the neighborhood, the widow of a rich man of good family, and a person whose good-will gave a social hall-mark.

"Oh, yes, she was very kind to me, though she did treat me as if I were a child."

Peter smiled.

"Why, that's what you seemed to her, I dare say. She must be sixty at least."

"For all that I'm not a child. I feel as if I'd been growing older at a great rate lately," said Nannie, with a little musing smile on her face; "so many things have happened to me, important things, in such a short space of time. It seems to me now as if for the first

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

eighteen years of my life I had been asleep, and then as if I had woke up suddenly to a rush of real, exciting life ! ”

Peter could not see his wife's face, but he was both touched and amused by her words and the dreamy, childish tone in which she uttered them. He could not fail to be conscious of a change that had already taken place in the little girl, fresh from the wilds of Lancashire, whom he had met on the Bredinsbury platform only a few short months before. She had then seemed to him a child purely, fresh, simple, eager, ignorant. Now she was already developing a certain shrewdness and resourcefulness with which he had not credited her at the outset. In a few short words she seemed now able to sum up exactly the effect which any particular character produced upon onlookers ; and this attribute, which she had already exercised notably in the case of Miss Pemberton and Lady Joanna, spoke at least of a certain superficial cleverness in the curate's daughter.

“ What did Mrs. Etheling say ? ” asked Peter.

“ Oh, not much to remember ; she told me about her pet dogs,” said Nannie. “ They were all so busy talking about the theatricals they are going to have in October that very little else was mentioned.”

“ Yes,” said Peter. “ They are an institution at Greyfriars. I dare say you have heard of ‘ Ye Mummers,’ a company of clever amateurs who give performances every year at Bredinsbury during the cricket week ? ”

“ Oh, yes, they were talking about them, and saying how bad the actresses were whom they always bring down to play with them.”

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Peter laughed.

"Yes, all amateurs talk like that of professional players. Well, it was these performances, I believe, that first fired the ladies of the Greyfriars' 'set' with the notion that they could do much better themselves. So for the last three years they have got up a piece, which they play in the old banqueting-hall at the earl's place, and about which we all get very much excited."

"Oh, yes, they're excited about it already."

"What piece are they going to play this year?"

"I don't think they quite know yet. It appears Lord Thanington wants one thing, and Lady Cressage, who seems to be the leading spirit in this, wants another."

"You will be invited, of course, now."

"Yes, I suppose we shall. But I think I wish it were a dance instead of a piece."

"It will be both, you know. They wind up with a ball."

"Oh!"

Nannie's eyes sparkled.

"I suppose you do dance, Nannie, don't you?"

"Yes. Not so very well; I've never had much practice. But I like it, of course. Don't you?"

"Well, I've had less practice than you, you know. And I don't think I should care about it, unless I could dance with you."

That was a characteristic speech, for Peter's interests in life were all bound up in Nannie.

The next few days passed quietly, the chief event being Nannie's state call at Greyfriars in the carriage of

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

one of the Bredinsbury ladies who had been at the dinner-party, and who offered to drive her there. This offer Nannie was delighted to accept, as Greyfriars was a mile or two out of the town.

That visit was a dull one, as the two ladies were received by Lady Joanna only, and the conversation was of the driest type.

But with the cricket week things began to be lively again. Nannie and Peter were asked to luncheon; and though the former was obliged to go alone she did not spend a dull time on that account.

The whole party had been to the theater on the previous evening, and criticism was severe. Nannie observed that while the gentlemen, who were amateurs, were loudly praised, at least by the ladies, the playing of the female parts was scoffed at and derided.

One of the actresses was too old, another was ill-dressed, and a third was described as a pretty doll, without talent or knowledge of her art.

Lady Cressage was particularly virulent.

"Very severe, aren't they?" said Lord Thanington, contriving, as they all rose from table, to get near to Nannie. "Were you at the theater last night?"

"No," said Nannie. "My husband's always so tired when he gets home in the evening that I shouldn't like to ask him to take me."

"There's a good little wife," smiled the earl. "They act rather well, these 'Mummers.' Our people like to flatter themselves they do better, but for myself I should be very proud if they were half as good. This is between ourselves, mind!" he added, laughing. "I

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

shouldn't like Lady Cressage, who is our Mrs. Siddons, to hear me say so !”

Nannie laughed back brightly as they crossed the hall, a little in the rear of the rest.

“Do you act yourself, Lord Thanington ?” asked she.

He shook his head,

“I'm too old,” said he. “It would be more to the purpose for me to ask if you do.”

“Oh, no, I've never tried.”

“Wouldn't you like to ?”

Nannie hesitated.

“Yes, I suppose I should,” she said. Then, after a moment's pause, she added thoughtfully : “I mean, I should like to learn.”

The earl pretended to be mightily astonished.

“What !” cried he. “You think you would have to learn. What astounding, unheard-of modesty ! All the ladies I've ever met have supposed thy could act without the formality of studying the art.”

Nannie looked thoughtful.

“I don't think I *understand* where the difficulty lies,” she admitted slowly. “I only know it must be difficult, because I hear people say that real actresses so often act badly. Well then, if they, who have studied and tried hard, don't do it well, how could I, who have never done it at all ? And I should hate to do it badly and be laughed at.”

The earl, who had slackened his pace, and, by dawdling about the big fire in the hall, had detained her also, looked down at her very kindly.

“Spoken like a sensible woman !” said he, with grave

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

approval. "And you are quite right. Of course you couldn't act very well ; it is not to be expected. If you were to act at all, you would have to submit to be coached up like a parrot. And then, if you were very good, and careful, and submissive, you might succeed in giving a second-rate performance, which would seem creditable, as all the rest of the performers would be third-rate. And you would be applauded to the skies as a genius of the first water."

Nannie, whose joy in life caused her always to see the fun in things with a keen eye, laughed at this description until the tears came to her eyes.

"I think you're wise," she said at last, "not to let your opinion be very widely known. It doesn't sound at all like an echo of what they think."

At that Lord Thanington laughed too.

"You must keep my secret," said he. "And if you do, I shall find means to reward such amazing reticence."

"Now I wonder," said Nannie, thoughtfully, as she put her foot on the marble curb and looked down at the red fire, "why people say that women can't keep a secret? I think we keep a great deal more to ourselves than men do."

"And I'm sure of it," said the earl, quietly. "The reason is that women have to be so much more diplomatic than we. There is always some one whom you are doing your best to please—a husband, or a father, or a sweetheart, or perhaps, in the case of a coquette, a dozen sweethearts."

"That's a new view," said Nannie, laughing again.

"As you grow older you'll find it's a true one," said the earl.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Of course coquettes don't count, because they're shallow and vain and insincere," said she, when there was a pause.

"Oh, pray don't be so scathing, Mrs. Pemberton. Personally I like coquettes. They take an infinite deal of trouble to please, and we should be grateful to anybody who does that."

"I don't suppose we mean the same thing by coquetry," said Nannie.

"I dare say not," said the earl.

And then Mrs. Pontesbury came gliding into the hall, and going up to Lord Thanington, with a pleading look and a little pathetic upturning movement of the face, lisped out in a soft voice some trivial request, to which he at once acceded. Nannie glanced at her, and decided that this was the sort of woman she should call a coquette, and she wondered whether Lord Thanington would agree with her.

Nannie did not like Mrs. Pontesbury, and felt that there was an undercurrent of antagonism to herself in that lady's softly-uttered speeches. She liked better Lady Violet's slangy directness, and Lady Cressage's tolerant coolness, although both these ladies betrayed, by subtile tones and inflections, that they also were not too well pleased by Nannie's admission into the Greyfriars' "set." For this was, according to Mrs. East-Denby, what had just taken place.

It was that very day that Nannie learnt that this was the generally-accepted view of the state of affairs. Mrs. Denby had been at the piano, playing a little drawing-room piece with so light and delicate a touch that she seemed to put into it more than the music was meant to

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

express, and Nannie, attracted by her charming talent, had drawn apart from the rest to listen.

It was the first time since her marriage that these two had had the opportunity of exchanging a few words unheard by the rest. Perhaps Mrs. Denby had played on purpose to draw the young wife's attention. At any-rate, the moment she was near her, the elder lady turned her head, and, smiling into Nannie's eyes with significant gaze, said, in a low voice :

"I told you so, didn't I? I prophesied that you would come back to us and join our 'set.'"

Nannie recoiled a little.

"Oh, not that," she said quickly. "It's not that at all."

For some reason which she could not understand, Mrs. East-Denby's flattering tones and smiles were even less to her taste than the subdued antagonism of the other ladies.

"It is that, though, and why should you mind?" said the elder lady, calmly. "Nine-tenths of the ladies about here would give their ears to be taken up, as you are being taken up, by the Greyfriars' people."

Nannie, who had recovered herself, smiled almost contemptuously.

"I certainly shouldn't boast of having been taken up by them," she said. "They've been kind to me, and helped me a little on my first start in life, that's all. I should never presume upon that."

"Of course you wouldn't. But you'll recognize before long that I've told you the truth. And I congratulate you."

Nannie was not at all pleased. Flattered as she had

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

been by the attentions she had received from the earl and Lady Joanna, she had taken something very like Miss Pemberton's view of the situation, and supposed that it was her youthfulness and consequent ignorance of life which had made her for the time interesting to these smart people as a curiosity. That their interest was likely to be permanent, or to place her on the same footing with these grand ladies, she had scarcely supposed.

Nevertheless, it was inevitable that these words of Mrs. East-Denby's should remain in her mind, and that she should amuse herself by wondering vaguely how she would have liked to be one of them, to live in the atmosphere of ease and luxury that surrounded them, to be able to wear the pretty clothes they wore, and to have around her all these elements which constitute a brilliant life.

And the end of it was that her musings left her a little restless and dissatisfied, and she did not feel quite at ease, after her return home, until Peter came back and she was able to tell him all about it.

Peter, who thought nothing good enough for his pretty little wife, naturally took Mrs. East-Denby's view of the situation, and told Nannie she was an ungrateful girl not to be delighted with her good fortune. He did not, man that he was, appreciate certain difficulties which Nannie foresaw, in the way of dress and of other luxuries, difficulties which would certainly crop up if she were to assume an equality with the rich ladies of Greyfriars.

It was about a week later, when the cricket week, with all its excitements, was over, that Peter returned

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

home with a great piece of news. Miss Pemberton had come to tea with them, and it was to the two ladies that the young solicitor unfolded his information.

Nannie had already heard from Miss Pemberton that Lord Thanington had called at the office that day, and it was in answer to her remark upon this that Peter declared himself.

"Yes, he came this afternoon," he said, "and you'll never guess what he came about."

"Not on business?" said Nannie.

"Well, it was partly on business. But chiefly, I think, it was about you."

"Me?"

"Yes. Lord Thanington wants you to take part in their theatricals," said Peter, not without pride.

"Oh! Peter!"

Nannie had half risen from her seat. She didn't quite know whether she was pleased or only frightened. Miss Pemberton drew herself up.

"And I suppose," said the spinster, "you told him that your wife knows nothing about acting, and would only spoil the piece they gave her to say, as any inexperienced person must do."

"Indeed I didn't say that," said Peter, reddening. "I did mention that I thought she had never acted before, but he said she had already told him that; and he added that she spoke with so much modesty that he felt sure there would be no difficulty in teaching her what she was to do."

"Oh, Peter!" cried Nannie again.

She was beginning to feel a joyous excitement steal-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

ing through her veins at the prospect. "And—and what did you say next?"

"I told him if that was so, and if he felt sure that you wouldn't be given anything to do that you couldn't do, I would tell you what he said. And I thanked him for his kindness, and said I was pretty sure you would like to do it."

"You did!" cried Miss Pemberton. "You said you were ready to let your wife act with Mr. Shirley Brede, and all those fast men at Greyfriars! And let them make love to her, and perhaps kiss her, and at rehearsals too!"

Peter frowned.

Nannie grew angry.

"I think, Miss Pemberton, you need not suppose I would do anything that Peter would not like. It's no worse to have to act with the people I meet at Greyfriars than to talk to them at dinner. And I don't think it's very nice of you to speak like that about Peter's best client and his friends."

Peter gave her an appreciative glance, and added, in perhaps a slightly half-hearted way:

"I don't at all suppose she will have a very important part. It will only be a few lines, I dare say."

"Oh, well, of course, if you like to trust your wife among people of a different rank and of a different standard to your own, I can say nothing," said Miss Pemberton, having indeed said all she had to say.

"There are only two sorts of wives," said Peter, with great gravity. "There's the sort you can trust anywhere, and there's the sort you can't trust at all."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Nannie, who was on her feet, clasping her hands, shot at him a grateful glance.

“ Oh, Peter, ” said she, breathlessly, but with deep earnestness, “ you’re right, you’re quite, quite right. I *thank* you for saying that ! ”

And her bright eyes shone in a sort of luminous haze as she met her husband’s affectionate, proud smile with a frank look of gratitude and pride, which he remembered long afterwards.

CHAPTER XIV.

PETER and Nannie had many a talk together about the coming theatricals ; but it was so long before either of them heard any more about the approaching performance that Nannie began to grow anxious and fearful, and to think that the powers had changed their minds about including her in the cast.

In the meantime, however, with an eye to the ball which was to follow the dramatic entertainment, she made her husband practise waltzing with her in one of the still empty rooms of their big house. And Peter, though he laughed at her, and told her that such frivolities were unbecoming to a person of his staid profession, was content to humor her, and to be her partner in these odd, solitary dances.

She was not inconsiderate. If he looked tired after dinner, she would refuse to accept his invitation, always given with mock formality, to accord him the pleasure of a waltz ; if, on the other hand, he seemed refreshed and eager for the fun, she would skip up the stairs with a laughing face, light a row of candles on the mantelpiece of one of the empty rooms, make him a stately curtsy, and then rush laughing into his arms with a strict command that he was to keep time and step better than he had done before.

And there, shyly nervous lest either of the servants should find some pretext to open the door, and should

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

spread about the report of these private saltatory performances, they would set to work in earnest, singing the time, "one-two-three, one-two-three," until they were tired out, when they would blow out the candles and steal down-stairs to the drawing-room, laughing and congratulating each other on their increasing proficiency.

It was not until the first days of September that Nannie's doubts and fears, which had begun to grow acute, were set at rest.

Then Lady Joanna and Lady Cressage called together at the old house in St. Dunstan's to inform her that they proposed to begin rehearsing on the following day, and that they hoped she would be able to be at Greyfriars by twelve o'clock.

"Oh, yes, I can be there easy enough," said Nannie, full of excitement, though she was conscious that neither of the ladies was particularly cordial. "Is it yet settled what the piece is to be?"

"Oh, yes," said Lady Cressage, with a slight shrug. "There has been a great deal of discussion about it, and I can't say I think the final decision is entirely satisfactory. However, it's all fixed up now, and Lord Thanington has had his own way. It's to be 'The Tyranny of Tears,' and you're to play the wife."

This statement had no significance to the unsophisticated Nannie. She received the announcement with a submissive bend of the head. Lady Joanna uttered a slight sound, which was a sort of modified, dissatisfied grunt. Lady Cressage drew herself up, and stared rather superciliously at Nannie.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Well," she said at last, rather impatiently, "I hope you're satisfied?"

Nannie looked at her blankly.

"Satisfied!" echoed she. "I can't be that until I know whether I can do it. Is it a long part?"

Lady Cressage smiled rather disdainfully, and Lady Joanna moved impatiently.

"It's only the principal part in the piece."

"Oh!" Nannie's cheeks blanched with fright. "Of course I can't play that! Why, I've never acted before!"

"You'd better tell Lord Thanington so," said Lady Cressage, more dryly than ever. "It was he who chose the piece and said you were to play the part. He said it ought to be played by a little woman, and that we were all too tall."

Nannie replied with confidence:

"Oh, of course, I sha'n't attempt it; it's out of the question. I should only make a dreadful exhibition of myself, however hard I tried. Will you tell Lord Thanington so, Lady Joanna?"

"I think you'd better tell him yourself," said she, somewhat mollified by the decided attitude Nannie took up. "He isn't used to contradiction, or to being thwarted in anything he's set his mind on. So I think the thwarting had better come at first hand."

Nannie looked rather blank.

"I'll—I'll get Peter to tell him," she said, in a crest-fallen tone, which made both the other ladies smile involuntarily.

"You'd better come yourself to-morrow and tell him how you feel about it."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

But Nannie shrank from this course, and answered very sensibly :

“I’d rather not. How could I persist in refusing if the earl himself were there to persist that I should do what he wanted ?”

There was a moment’s pause, and the other ladies smiled still more. It was evident that the little woman was in earnest, and they could not help seeing that her position was a difficult one. After a short silence Lady Joanna spoke.

“I think you must come,” she said. “And I am also strongly of opinion that you must play and make the best of it. But that you can argue out with him. I quite agree with you that it is a pity he should have made up his mind in the way he has done ; but anything is better than putting him out of temper about it. I should advise you to see the piece—to read it, I mean—and then to tell him frankly that you would be grateful if he would let you off.”

Nannie, who was trembling still, agreed to this course. Lady Joanna went on :

“I don’t suppose he will mind, but you can at least try.”

“I will, I will,” said Nannie.

She was so evidently distressed by the ordeal which threatened her, that the hearts of her two visitors were a little touched, and they left her much more cordially disposed than they had come.

As for Nannie, Peter found her in a state of great excitement and distress, in which he hardly shared.

“Look here,” he said, “Lord Thanington is no fool. If he has decided that you are to play this part, you

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

may be sure that you can get through it all right. He's not a boy ; he knows all about theaters and acting. Probably he's right in thinking you can be coached up. He can have no possible object in wishing you to spoil the piece and to make an exhibition of incompetency under his roof before his guests."

These sensible words comforted Nannie extremely, and on the following morning she set out on foot for Greyfriars with a lighter heart.

She was wearing one of the white cotton dresses she had brought with her from Preston, and was secretly troubled by its lack of smartness. However, she wore her Paris hat, and Peter had done his best to persuade her that her appearance could not be improved upon.

She was punctual to the minute, but she was not the first arrival. In the hall, gathered round a table, she found Lady Cressage, Shirley Brede and a gentleman whom she did not know, but whom Shirley Brede introduced as Major Murray.

The major was a man approaching middle age, not very tall, rather thick-set, and decidedly plain of face. He was, of course, perfectly civil, but Nannie detected at once in his face and manner an antagonism even more decided than any she had yet encountered at Greyfriars.

"I understand you've had no experience whatever in acting, Mrs. Pemberton ?" he said after the first greetings had been exchanged between the ladies.

"No," answered Nannie quickly. "And I've only come to-day to ask that I may not have more than a few lines to say."

The major smiled dryly.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"This is what Lord Thanington proposes that you should play."

And he opened the pages of a long type-written part, at which Nannie shook her head, and smilingly said that she could never attempt anything like that.

While they were all bending over the table together Lord Thanington came down among them, and little Nannie turned to him at once.

"Oh, how could you think I could play a long part like this, Lord Thanington?" she said, treating the matter as a jest.

But the earl did not smile back. He took everything seriously, and opposition of any kind made him more serious than ever.

"I shall be much obliged if you will try," he said, putting the words in the form of a request, though his tone and look were those of command. "I am afraid you will find it very hard work; the part is long, and you have no experience to help you. But it is essential that the character should be played by a lady of a certain physical type, and who will make a good contrast to Lady Cressage, who plays the comedy part of the type-writer girl. I am quite sure that you will do your best to oblige us, and I am equally sure that Major Murray will do his best to bring you through the ordeal safely."

There was a silence after these words. Nannie felt horribly frightened, for she saw that it was impossible to avoid making a desperate effort to satisfy him. Nothing but the fear of offending, beyond recall, the man upon whom her husband's prosperity so greatly depended, prevented her from refusing to make an at-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

tempt in which she felt sure she should signally fail.

As it happened, it was her modesty that saved her. When Lord Thanington, observing that they would want to get to rehearsal, led them all to one of the drawing-rooms which was on the shady side of the house, where they could be undisturbed, Nannie lingered in the background, and felt quite soothed when Shirley Brede, lingering too, spoke comfortingly in her ear.

"Cheer up," he said, "don't look so miserable. Just swallow your words and get them through somehow, and let Thanington bear the blame if nobody hears you."

Nannie could not help laughing at this suggestion of a way out of the difficulty.

"No," she said obstinately, but with almost a sob in her voice. "I'll do the best I can, and then, if I'm very bad, I'll never look anybody here in the face again."

"Oh, don't worry," said Shirley, kindly. "I only said that in fun. The major will pull you through. He's an enthusiast; he cares for nothing but acting, and he's been at it for years, and would give a good account of himself on the regular stage any day."

"Yes, but that only makes him the more angry at having to act with me."

"Look here," said Shirley, "the best thing you can do is to throw yourself on his mercy. Let him see that you're willing to be taught, and he'll take no end of pains with you if he sees you mean to work."

Nannie, in whom all anticipations of enjoyment were now thoroughly dead, thanked him and resolved to

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

take his advice. As she entered the blue drawing-room, she heard Lord Thanington say to the major, in a reassuring tone, evidently in answer to some protest :

“ Coach her ! coach her ! She’ll learn.”

It was not comforting, however, to see the despairing shake of the head with which the major replied to this assurance as Lord Thanington opened one of the long French windows, nodded with a smile to Nannie, and went out across the veranda into the strong sunshine on the lawn.

Taking her courage in both hands, Nannie hurried across the room to the major, and addressed him in a tone of earnest entreaty, while Lady Cressage turned to talk to Shirley Bredé and to two other men who were to take part in the performance, who had now come in.

“ Major Murray,” she said, “ I do hope you understand that it’s not my fault that I have to try to play this part.”

But, in spite of her pleading tone, the major was very cross and disagreeable.

“ Oh, it’s a very good part. There’s nothing to be sorry about, I assure you.”

Nannie bit her lip to keep back the tears.

“ They say that you’re a very clever actor and that you’re very kind if one tries to do one’s best,” she said, with a quiver in her voice. “ Will you do your best with me ? Indeed I will work hard. I will do exactly as you tell me.”

The major was only human, and Nannie was very pretty. He became a little less gruff, though his next words seemed hardly promising.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Of course you think you're a born actress," he said, with an air of martyrdom. "It isn't your fault that you think so : every woman does."

"But I don't," said Nannie, earnestly. "Such an idea never entered my head."

But the major was unconvinced.

"Look here," said he, "I wasn't a decent actor till I'd been at it twelve years, and then only because I'm so confoundedly ugly. Now you haven't that advantage." Nannie began to laugh. "The moment you go on you'll get told you're perfect, and you'll think you needn't take any pains. Now, that's fatal. To do any good at acting——"

"But," interrupted Nannie, "I've got to take pains *before* I appear, and I don't think you will spoil me by telling me I'm perfect, will you?"

The major looked at her, and a twinkle at last appeared in his eyes.

"Well, no, I sha'n't," said he, "and so I promise you."

"Very well," said Nannie, delighted to see him softening a little, "then try me and see if I won't work before you scold me any more. And remember, if I'm hard to teach, that it's not my fault that I'm taking lessons at all."

The major had to laugh, and then the rehearsal began, each member of the small cast reading his or her part, and the major stage-managing.

They had gone through the entire piece when the luncheon bell rang, and the major then told Nannie he would give her a lesson to herself when the meal was over.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Shirley Brede sat by her at table and asked tenderly after Miss Pemberton.

"What on earth did she say when she heard you were to have a part in these theatricals?" asked he.

Nannie blushed crimson at the remembrance of the words which her husband's aunt had used, and Shirley instantly made a shrewd guess.

"I'm ready to bet," said he, "that she objected strongly, and that one of her reasons was that you would be brought in contact with me. I expect," he went on, as Nannie tried in vain to repress a smile, "that she referred to me as 'that Shirley Brede!' Ah, I see she did!"

Nannie made a faint protest, but Shirley would not hear her.

"The absurd part of it is," he went on, in a slightly-aggrieved tone, "that the old lady has entirely failed to hit the right nail on the head. It's not I who should be labeled 'Dangerous!' It's Thanington."

But Nannie was incredulous, and she stood up for the earl with warmth.

"It's most unfair and ungenerous of you to say that," she said. "Lord Thanington is my ideal of what a man in his position ought to be."

Shirley turned upon her his blue eyes, in which there was a shade more seriousness than usual.

"Yes," said he, "that's what people think. And from one point of view they're perfectly right. But—it's not the point of view of the Miss Pembertons."

Nannie said nothing more, on the subject. She was hardly made uneasy by the sudden earnestness which she noted in the lively Shirley; but she was a little im-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

pressed by it, and she wondered what he meant. That he intended giving her any sort of warning against anybody she did not want to think ; but his words came back to her mind later with an unpleasant significance.

When luncheon was over, Major Murray took his pupil in hand with startling energy. He marked off about half the first of the four acts, and drilled her in every word and tone with unsparing rigor.

“ Now you’ve got to study this,” he said, “ not to yourself, but aloud. And you’ve got to remember two things. The first is, that you must make yourself heard : so that you mustn’t drop your voice. And the second is, you must be understood : so you must speak clearly and not too fast. Many of the cleverest of amateur actresses spoil everything by speaking too fast.”

She promised to pay the most careful heed to his instructions, and when Lady Joanna, who was going to Bredinsbury that afternoon, drove her home, she was rather contemptuously amused by the seriousness with which young Mrs. Pemberton regarded her task.

It was three days later when the second rehearsal took place, and Nannie came through the ordeal well. With beautiful parrot-like precision she repeated her part, and was able to take and profit by the major’s next attempt, which was to infuse a little naturalness, a little ease into her movements.

Here again she gave her whole mind to his directions, and so she continued to do during the six weeks the rehearsals lasted.

It was when they were within a fortnight of the great event that Lord Thanington was present one day while

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

they were at their work. Nannie was so nervous that she was seized with fear as to what she would feel when not only the earl, but a couple of hundred other spectators were present. The major, however, who had become a great friend of his docile pupil, comforted her with the assurance that it was much worse to act before one person in the cold light of day than to do so before a full night audience.

"Not one in twenty cares what we say or what we do," he went on consolingly. "They'll all be flirting and whispering, and exchanging comments about a dozen other things. And those who do listen have seen so many better and so many worse performances that neither our goodness nor our badness will excite them much."

Nannie laughed at this, and gathered up her courage to do her best. When it was over the earl came straight to her and congratulated her in the kindest manner.

"I told you that you could do it," said he. "And I consider you have put us under an obligation."

"Oh, Lord Thanington, you could easily have got someone to do it better than I. Lady Violet——"

"Lady Violet is not a good actress ; she speaks too fast," said the earl. "And she's appeared so often in these little plays of ours. People like a change. Now I want you to see something I've got for your husband. It ought to have been ready three months ago, but he will have to forgive the delay. Will you come into the library ? I've got it there."

Nannie accompanied him across the corridor, where the door of the library stood open. On a table near the

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

window she saw a handsome silver cigarette-box, which Lord Thanington took up and showed her.

"Does Pemberton smoke?" asked he, as Nannie's eyes sparkled with admiration.

"Sometimes," said she, as the earl opened the lid and showed her the inscription inside :

"Presented to Peter Pemberton, Esq., on the occasion of his marriage, with the congratulations and good wishes of Geoffrey, Earl Thanington."

"Oh!" cried Nannie, "he'll be delighted. He's never had such a beautiful present—I'm sure. But you'll give it him yourself, won't you?"

"No, no. He'll like it all the better if you give it to him." Then, as Nannie took up the tissue paper to wrap round it, Lord Thanington took something else from the table. "And now there's our present, my daughter's and mine—to you."

"Oh, no!" cried Nannie, rather alarmed, "I'd rather not have a present. We really haven't had wedding presents at all, Lord Thanington. Peter doesn't like to receive them, and so——"

"He will let you receive one from Lady Joanna and me," said the earl, smiling, as he put a little case, a few inches long, into her hand. "Open it," he went on, "and see whether our choice pleases you."

Trembling a little, and rather frightened, Nannie opened the case, and cried "Oh!" breathlessly on discovering, on the pale blue velvet lining, a crescent of diamonds.

"I can't take that. I know Peter wouldn't let me! Oh, you mustn't be offended, either you or Lady Joanna, but I really couldn't, you know."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

And she shut up the case and put it on the table.

The earl promptly picked it up again and pressed it into her hand, holding her fingers down upon it in spite of her protest.

“There is no possibility of your refusing to take it,” he said simply, “any more than there is of Pemberton’s refusing to let you. I knew his father for a great many years, and nobody can restrain me from the pleasure of giving a wedding present to him or to his wife. There, take it; Lady Joanna will be ready to drive you back home. If you don’t like diamonds now, you will some day.”

And he “bundled her,” as she expressed it afterwards to Peter, out of the room, with the presents in her hand, very much as if she had been a slightly refractory child who was forgiven on account of its extreme youth.

CHAPTER XV.

OF course Nannie had to express her thanks to Lady Joanna for her alleged share in the splendid present she had just received from the earl; but it did not need Lady Joanna's offhand rejection of her thanks to prove where the whole credit of the gift lay.

Nannie was agitated by a good many different feelings when, on her arrival home, she took out the earl's presents and laid them on a table in the drawing-room for Peter's inspection on his return.

She had a strong suspicion that he would be less pleased than Lord Thanington had affected to suppose. She herself felt a sort of fright at the magnificence of the present to herself. But already she had begun to picture, with a little thrill of delight, the effect which the sparkling stones would have, set in the front of the plainly-made white muslin dress which she proposed to wear in two out of the four acts of "The Tyranny of Tears."

It was with a sort of guilty feeling that she took the crescent out of its case, and fastening it in the front of her white cotton frock, stood on tiptoe on a stool before the high fireplace to admire the effect of the gems in the glass set in the mantelpiece.

She was thus occupied, rather carried away with admiration of her own splendor, when she heard Peter's step in the hall outside. She jumped down from the

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

stool and tried to unfasten the brooch ; but the catch was strong and rather stiff, and she had not succeeded in undoing it when the door opened, and Peter, rather surprised not to be met as usual on the threshold, came into the room.

“ Oh, Peter ! ” cried she, a little confused, as she came to meet him.

He had already caught sight of the diamonds, and he stopped short looking at them.

“ What on earth have you got there ? ” he asked sharply.

“ Isn’t it splendid—much too splendid ? ” said Nannie, with a slight tremor in her voice. “ It’s from Lord Thanington and Lady Joanna ; it’s their wedding present. I didn’t want to take it, Peter, I really didn’t,” she went on, as she saw that a frown had already gathered on his face, “ but they would make me.” She was conscious, as she spoke, that her use of the word “ they ” was slightly disingenuous, but she hurried on, “ And look what he sent you. I asked him to give it you himself, but he said you’d like it best if I brought it. Just look, isn’t it lovely ? ”

As she spoke she thrust the smart silver cigarette-box into Peter’s hands. He banged it down on the table again promptly.

“ I don’t want his cigarette-boxes,” he said surlily. “ And you don’t want his diamonds. At least I should hope you don’t ? ”

And he turned upon her with a frown so hard, a look so black, that she caught her breath and grew suddenly very pale.

“ Oh, Peter, don’t be angry, don’t be angry with

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

me!" cried she, tremulously. "How could I help taking the presents when he insisted on giving them? I tell you I did all I could. The moment I saw the crescent I shut up the case and put it down, and said I knew you wouldn't like me to have it. But he said it was out of the question for either of us to refuse a present from him, because he had been a friend of your father's. And he simply packed the things into my hands and nodded to me to go away. What could I do? What could you have done yourself?"

Without answering, Peter walked, frowning heavily and with his head protruded, two or three times up and down the room: then he threw himself into a chair, staring at the floor.

"Do say something! Don't look away from me like that!" cried Nannie, plaintively, coming near to him, but restraining her impulse to put one hand on his shoulder, so much was she frightened by this new aspect of the man she had married.

Then he looked up suddenly, and she saw an expression of proud reserve in his eyes which was altogether new to her towards herself.

"Oh, I'm quite ready to speak. What do you want me to say?" said he, almost harshly.

"Say you're not angry with me. Say you can see I couldn't help myself."

"Would you like me to say also that I'm pleased to see my wife taking presents of jewelry from a man like Lord Thanington?"

And out of his gray eyes, usually so tender in their glance as it rested upon her, there flashed a spark of somber fire.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Nannie recoiled a step. The words used by Shirley Brede, when he spoke of Lord Thanington as "dangerous," flew back into her mind with a fresh significance. But she rebelled alike against Shirley's accusations and against her husband's.

"What do you mean by 'a man like Lord Thanington'?" she asked straightforwardly. "Do you really mean that you think he did wrong to give us these things, and that we should do wrong to take them?"

Peter moved restlessly in the chair. He answered her question by another.

"If you didn't feel there was something wrong about it, why did you refuse to take the brooch at first?"

Nannie hesitated.

"Why, because our other friends are not rich people, so that we hadn't been used to receiving such handsome things. And I can't help thinking, now I've had time to consider, that if we have to accept these things, it is really your fault, Peter, and not mine, for encouraging me to go to Greyfriars at all. You must remember that I refused in the first place, didn't I?"

Peter got up and resumed his walk up and down again without answering. He began to see that he had himself helped to put his wife in a false position. Intoxicated with pride at the admiration she excited, and unselfishly anxious that she should enjoy all the pleasures that were offered to her, he had not sufficiently considered the inconveniences which must inevitably arise from the difference in rank and fortune between a country solicitor's wife and the rich "county people" who had taken her up.

Although he saw that he had not acted with due cir-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

ouspection, Peter knew that, in justice to himself, he could say that the net which seemed to threaten him and his wife had been drawn about them so gradually that they had not perceived its nature until now. To have refused the invitation to that first dinner-party from the most important of his clients would have been an impossibility. And equally impossible it would have been, or at least gravely impolitic, to refuse to let Nannie take part in the private theatricals when her assistance was asked as a favor.

Yet it was clear that, difficult as it was, a stand must be made now ; and the question was how to make it without doing irretrievable injury both to his business prospects and to Nannie's hopes of social enjoyment, which were now so much bound up with the Greyfriars "set."

Nannie grew restless as his walk up and down went on.

"What are we to do?" she said at last, rather querulously, as she sat down on a sofa and began to play nervously with the frill of a cushion.

His wife's voice suddenly fell upon his reverie with a pathetic insistence that made Peter turn sharply in his walk and look down at her with the first smile he had given her since his return home.

"Why, chickie, I'm sure I don't know," said he, passing one hand through his hair with so much restless uneasiness, with such a worried look, that Nannie sprang up and came to him with the tears in her eyes.

"Look here, Peter, don't worry," said she. "It's all been a mistake, nothing but a mistake ; I've felt that lots and lots of times. Let's have done with it all,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

once and for all. I'll send back the crescent, and I'll write and say I don't feel equal to the task of trying to act before so many people, and you shall make the best sort of apology you can to Lord Thanington, and we'll just live quietly like the doctor and his wife, and the vicars and bankers and their wives, and not trouble ourselves any more about the Greyfriars people at all."

Now, whether this were the outcome of genuine feeling and conviction, or only the result of momentary irritation and dismay, it would have been hard to say. Perhaps it was a combination of both these things. At any rate, Peter smiled at her kindly, and putting one arm round her waist, gave her a hug before he answered her.

"Ah!" said he, "that's the sort of thing one can't do. If it were even possible, you see, it would mean not only disappointment to you, but something like professional and social ruin. People would talk, you know, if Lord Thanington were suddenly to withdraw his business from me, as he probably would do. And you may guess the sort of good-natured things they'd say in a little scandal-mongering cathedral town if it suddenly became known that you were no longer on the visiting list at Greyfriars. You know the blame would be put on us—on you."

Nannie drew a long breath. She felt irritated, worried in her turn. She felt that she never wanted to go near Greyfriars again, and her heart rose in resentment against the inferiority in social position which made it necessary for her to accept the crumbs thrown to her in the way of recognition, instead of being able to take her place fearlessly with these people as an equal.

'The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"It's too bad," she said, between her set teeth, clasping and unclasping her hands and trying to keep the tears back, "that we should be treated like this, that we should have to take as a favor what is really an insult!"

But Peter, melted at her distress, began to soothe and to caress her with his old tenderness.

"No, no, child, now you're exaggerating," said he. "No doubt this brooch-thing"—he could not resist a vicious intonation on the word—"was given to you in all kindness, just as the box was given to me. It's only the feeling that we're receiving presents we can't afford to give an equivalent for that makes me uneasy and—and that rubs me up the wrong way, in fact."

"But you said it was something more than that!" persisted Nannie. "You talked as if you were especially annoyed because it was Lord Thanington who gave me the crescent! But if you thought he was too wicked to speak to——"

"Oh, hush, hush!" put in Peter, rather shocked at this plain speaking.

"Well, you did, you know, speak like that. I was going to say, if you thought so badly of him, why have you let me go so much to Greyfriars?"

Peter frowned a little again, not angrily this time, but with the consciousness that she had put a puzzling question.

"Don't you see," said he, "that the same man may be considered in different ways? He may be considered as a valuable client for one thing, and as a charming man in society for another. But at the same time he

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

may not be exactly the sort of man whom one cares to hear of as giving presents to one's wife ! ”

Nannie laughed outright and laid her head against her husband's shoulder.

“ Oh, Peter,” she cried, “ surely you don't suspect old Lord Thanington of making love to me ! ”

Her manner of saying this, proving, as it did most clearly, that the earl had made no such attempt, soothed Peter greatly. He laughed back as if he had not meant to imply any such thing, except as a sort of very bad joke.

“ Why, no,” said he, “ of course I don't.”

“ Because, you know, if you were as jealous as that, and couldn't hear of my exchanging half a dozen words with a man old enough to be my grandfather——”

“ Come, he's not so old as that ! ”

“ Well, his hair's quite white, and he must be nearly sixty ! ” retorted she. “ I was going to say, if you are so jealous as that, why don't you object to Major Murray's teaching me by the hour together, playing the part of my husband in the piece, and doing it beautifully too ? ”

And she laughed merrily up into her husband's face.

But Peter shook his head. He was not quite without shrewdness, this simple-hearted, laborious young lawyer.

“ Ah, Nannie, I feel quite safe there,” he said. “ I've heard too much of your squabbles with him, of his scoldings, of his martinet-like behavior to feel uneasy about the major. And then his nose ! No, Nanny, I don't say I'm handsome, but I'm a precious deal better looking than he is.”

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Well, Mr. Brede then ! Aren't you jealous of him ? He's very handsome, and very attractive, and I like him very much."

Peter smiled and rubbed his head thoughtfully.

"I don't exactly know why I am not jealous of him," said he. "By all the rules, and by Aunt Ellen's account, I certainly ought to be. But I think I have an idea that he's too much of a general lover, too much of an all-round ladies' man for you to be in danger of lavishing much affection upon him."

Nannie rewarded him for his perspicacity with a kiss.

"And you can find a good reason with every other man why I should not like him ! And the best reason of all is that I've got such a nice husband that every other man seems to have something wrong about him compared to my old Peter !"

Now this was a most satisfactory end for the discussion to come to, and Peter showed his appreciation of it in an added tenderness in face and voice. It was indeed rather by instinct than by knowledge that he felt he had not got firm hold of the deepest love of which his wife was capable, for certainly he had no fault to find with her behavior to him or to any one else.

The final decision they came to concerning the unfortunate presents was that, while Nannie could not well return the crescent, she should not wear it ; and it was she herself who made this suggestion.

Nevertheless, her renunciation did cost her a pang. And it would be unwise to say how many times in the course of the next few weeks she took the little velvet case out of the drawer in which she had placed it very deep down, and holding it up against the front of her

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

dress in the sun or in the gaslight, admired the flashing of its pure white stones, and wished—oh, wished so hard !—that she had been free to wear it as the ladies at Greyfriars wore their jewels.

The next two weeks were fraught with intense excitement, and it was inevitable that nervous terrors concerning her approaching appearance in the capacity of actress should overwhelm Nannie, and even affect her usually bright and happy temper.

At last, one evening when Peter had come home tired and irritable after a specially hard day's work, he told Nannie that he should be very glad when the tomfoolery was over.

"I sha'n't !" retorted Nannie, somberly, with her eyes blazing.

He had been sorry the moment the hasty words were out of his mouth. But his wife's sharp answer struck terror into his heart.

"Why ?" said he, hoarsely, leaning across the table and staring intently at her.

His look frightened Nannie, and she did not dare to tell the truth, that it had come into her mind to think how dull life would be when the great excitement was over. She looked down, stammered, grew petulant when he pressed her. Afraid of himself, Peter made a strong effort at self-command, and let the subject drop ; but the look he gave her filled her with vague uneasiness and some resentment.

Did he suspect her ? If so, of what ? He had allowed her to undertake this thing, and her conduct throughout had been beyond reproach. This was undoubtedly true, and his mistrust hurt and wounded her.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

For the first time the evening passed off uncomfortably, Nannie trying to be bright and amiable, but conscious all the time that she did so by an effort, and not naturally, as had been her wont.

Feeling her constraint, Peter too was ill at ease, and although he was as kind as ever, he was glad that the extreme fatigue which made his limbs heavy and his brains dull formed an excuse for a short evening.

In the meantime, it was, of course, inevitable that Nannie should feel the least bit in the world shy with Lord Thanington. She avoided him when she could, and this was certainly not difficult, as he did not come much in the way of the theatrical company and their everlasting rehearsals. With the greatest delicacy he never once mentioned the crescent, much to the relief of Nannie, who was dreadfully afraid he might ask her why she was not wearing it one evening when they assembled for a night rehearsal.

It did go to her heart not to be able to take it with her when the grand evening came and she and Peter drove up to Greyfriars together. It had begun to irritate Nannie to think that all she and her husband could afford was a musty old cab, while the rest of the visitors drove up in their broughams and landaus.

She was always feeling ashamed of these pettinesses, but she could not help the pricks of vanity and pride which the whole atmosphere of Greyfriars tended to encourage.

But if her arrival was not brilliant, her triumphs later in the evening more than made up for this.

For her first appearance was an undoubted success. It must be owned frankly that the credit of it redounded

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

more to her teacher, the clever and patient Major Murray, than to her. But she parroted through her part very nicely, was quite good—in bits—and her youth, beauty and freshness did the rest.

By the time the piece was half over the men were all in love with her, and the women were all asking each other, "Is *that* the lovely Mrs. Pemberton? What *can* they see in her?"

When "The Tyranny of Tears" was over, and the real orchestra of six performers struck up a waltz before the little musical piece which was to give Lady Violet the opportunity she had not had in the long play, Nannie, not quite ready yet to go down into the crowd, sat down in the real, "wings," on a spare chair, with a curious feeling, half tension relieved, half regret that the pleasure was over.

And as she sat there she heard Lord Thanington's voice in her ear. He was obliged to bend and to speak low, because the orchestra was playing softly, and there is, of course, always the feeling behind the scenes that you don't want your voice to penetrate to the audience "in front." Though, for the matter of that, the audience was making noise enough, now that it could use its tongues freely, to drown the braying of a dozen brass bands.

"I told you you would be a great success, did I not?" said he, and he smiled into her eyes with a mixture of triumph and congratulation. "So I hope you feel grateful for my faith in you, and for my giving you the chance of showing what is in you."

"Oh, indeed I do," said Nannie, smiling in the fullness of her heart. "I think the feeling that, if I failed

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

utterly, the blame would rest on you helped me through."

"There was no fear of that, for a single moment," said the earl, gravely. "Now you must take this. I can't allow you to wait till supper-time, for if you do you'll begin to feel faint and exhausted, and you won't enjoy the dance afterwards as I want you to do."

As he spoke he handed her a cup of turtle soup which he had brought her with his own hands, and sitting down beside her on a roll of carpet watched her eat it, smiling at her in quite a fatherly manner.

And while she ate he chatted away, until at last came the inevitable question. He had warned her that the edge of her frock was in close proximity to a nail, and as she removed it from danger he said suddenly :

"By the bye, why didn't you wear your crescent to-night ? Don't you like it ?"

Nannie grew scarlet and drew a long breath. It was bound to come ; she had known that it must. But how to meet it courteously and discreetly she had not a notion.

CHAPTER XVI.

LORD THANINGTON was experienced and shrewd enough to see at once, in the ingenuous face of young Mrs. Pemberton, certain indications of where the trouble lay. He was wily and full of tact, and so, instead of pressing his question about the diamonds, he asked her another.

“What makes you sit here in the draught and discomfort, where Brede and Lady Violet will presently tumble over you as they ‘go on’ and ‘come off’?” asked he. “Why don’t you go down among the audience and receive the homage of your admirers?”

“Oh,” replied Nannie, her face lighting up again when she found she had for the moment escaped the difficulty about his present, “I think I feel a little shy about it, and perhaps a little tired too. For it was exciting, you know; I couldn’t be quite sure that I shouldn’t break down.”

“You’re very modest,” said he; “perhaps you’re right to rest for a little while to collect your thoughts now the ordeal is over. But don’t wait here. I’ll take you through to the palm-house, where you can sit quietly while this little piece is being played, and then I’ll bring your husband to congratulate you. You’d like him to be the first, wouldn’t you?”

Now this was so prettily put that Nannie was delighted, and she agreed, and at once let the earl take

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

her through the billiard-room and into the domed conservatory where the big palms grew. Here he made her sit in a most comfortable lounge chair in a carpeted nook made lovely by spreading plants and by electric light, which shed a soft radiance through Chinese lanterns suspended from the roof.

"Oh," said Nannie, dreamily, "it seems so strange to think that it's all over."

The earl laughed a little.

"Are you glad, or sorry?"

"Glad for some things, I suppose. Sorry for others, I'm sure," said Nannie.

"You'll miss the excitement, won't you?"

"Yes. And the hard work that took up so much of my time—too much, perhaps."

The earl turned upon her a penetrating look.

"Who said that it was too much? Not you, I suppose?"

Nannie blushed.

"No, I didn't complain. But I think that I felt rather guilty about it at the same time."

"Did it make you neglect your duties?" asked the earl, with a smile.

"I don't think so," replied Nannie, gravely. "I didn't forget to order the dinner or to make up the weekly accounts. But perhaps the acting did take the color out of those prosaic occupations!" she added breaking into a laugh.

"And did Pemberton scold you for your frivolity?"

Her face changed.

"Oh, no. He's too good; he's goodness itself."

"I'm sure he would be. I think you may congratu-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

late yourself, Mrs. Pemberton, on having something like an ideal husband."

"That's just what I feel, and just what I say," replied Nannie, all the more earnestly, perhaps, that she was conscious that lately Peter had not held in her thoughts the all-absorbing place she felt he was entitled to.

"What I admire in him so much," went on the earl, "is that he doesn't think it necessary to make you lead a dull life just because he is obliged to lead a dull life himself."

Nannie's face clouded a little.

"I think in that," she said, "he's rather too good, too unnaturally unselfish; and as it's out of the question for him to go about enjoying himself much, I think I ought to give it up myself and to model my life on the lines of his."

A smile, which was rather a cynical one, played round Lord Thanington's lips as he answered gravely:

"Spoken like a loyal little wife. I quite agree with you that you ought to try, at least, to live up to your own ideal. Lots of misery would be avoided if all young wives took the same view of their duties as you do. I can tell you of a case in my own experience," he went on more solemnly, coming nearer to her, until he at last sat down on a little Moorish seat; then, leaning forward, he went on with his reminiscences. "It was the case of a young man who had everything that Nature or fortune could bestow upon him, except that good gift of a loving and sympathetic wife."

Almost as soon as he began Nannie shrewdly guessed that he was talking about himself, and she listened with reverent attention, full of sympathy and interest.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"It isn't every man," went on the earl, in a matter-of-fact way which precluded the idea that he was paying an empty compliment, "who has the luck, as Pemberton has had, to marry a woman possessing the precious gifts of common sense on the one hand and sympathy on the other. This man I am telling you of had not that luck. His wife was beautiful, accomplished, in all things apparently fitted to fill a prominent position worthily. Yet that one lack of good sense and sympathetic feeling proved enough to shipwreck, not perhaps her happiness but her husband's. Nobody pitied him; the husband of a beautiful wife doesn't get pity easily in this world. They brought all sorts of accusations against him; they said he was a *roué*, a cynic. Never was a greater mistake."

The earl was warming under the effect of his own words, and in Nannie's interested face it was perfectly easy for the man of experience to detect that she knew who was the hero of the story.

He went on: "Year after year the uneasy life dragged on, the wife satisfied and happy, living her own life, but wearing always the air of having a grievance. As for the man, I don't say he was a saint; he was not cold enough for that. But this I can truthfully aver, that he never ceased to suffer; that she was happy on her pedestal, and he was miserable beneath it. And so things went on," he continued in a lower voice, "until she died, leaving the reputation of a saint, which, indeed, in one way she well deserved. It was then too late for the man to make another experiment; and so he has reached old age without ever knowing the best treasures of a noble woman's love."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

He paused a moment ; Nannie plucked at her dress shyly. She was unspeakably touched, yet she did not know what to say. Shyly she raised her eyes to his, with a pretty look of sympathy which charmed him. But the next moment she lowered them again, with a guilty, uncomfortable feeling of having surprised in his face a look she would rather not have seen there.

The earl stood up.

“That’s the end of the story—almost,” said he. “It only remains to add that the one pleasure he has above all in his own old age is to see younger folks happy, and to encourage them in avoiding those errors into which he fell himself. I’m going to get you some flowers for the front of your dress,” he went on in a different tone ; “since you won’t wear an old man’s present, you shall at least not disdain his roses.”

Now Lord Thanington, it is hardly necessary to say, was one of the wildest old libertines who ever laid siege to a woman’s heart. Attracted at his first sight of Nannie by the freshness and youthfulness which were a woman’s highest charms in his world-weary eyes, he had, with the utmost tact, avoided not only the most remote attempt to make love to her, but even the many opportunities which had presented themselves of late for exchanging a few casual remarks with her. He had thus made it impossible for her to give credence to the vague stories about Lord Thanington’s wickedness, which gave such piquancy to the possessor of Greyfriars in the eyes of the chattering, gossiping ladies of the cathedral town. His manner towards her had always been kind, with almost a touch of fatherliness in it ; but he had spoken to her so little that, on the whole,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

there was nobody at Greyfriars who had not held a more prominent position in her thoughts than he. And this artful self-effacement of the earl's in regard to her had lulled her into an absolute confidence which was the very basis and bond of friendship.

Now that she had thus suddenly been admitted into his confidence, as it could not but seem to her, she was not only as free from all suspicion of him as ever, but she was deeply touched by what appeared to her to be a pitiful self-revelation. She rose from her chair and stood with a troubled look on her face, while he went from plant to plant, snipping off with a pocket-knife, after a fashion which would have made the gardeners weep, any blossom that took his fancy, until he had a great handful of flowers and foliage to bring back to her.

"Now," said he, "if you're not clever at arranging these things, I am. You don't come to my time of life without learning something, and I flatter myself I know how to arrange flowers to look their best."

Lord Thanington did not think it necessary to add that he had gained his experience by adorning a great many different ladies with his orchids and his ferns.

"Have you got any pins?" said he, adding, as Nannie shook her head, "Never mind, I have some." And he proceeded to pin each blossom and each leaf separately into the front of her dress, until an immense and very graceful spray extended from her shoulder to her breast.

Nannie submitted to this decoration, divided between a feeling that this was a kind and graceful act of courtesy from a man much more than old enough to be her

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

father, and an uneasy subconsciousness that Peter would not like it.

"There," said the earl, as he pinned a waving fern so that it stood almost upright on her shoulder, "perhaps you are right, and flowers are more becoming to you than jewelry. After all, diamonds will keep till you're old ; the delicacy of flowers and the freshness of youth go well together."

Now this being the third allusion he had made to her apparent contempt for his gift, Nannie felt compelled to make some sort of excuse or apology.

"Oh, it wasn't that ! How could you think me so vain ? And so ungrateful ? I think it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen ; I've looked at and admired it a hundred times. But we think—both Peter and I—that it's too handsome for me to wear. Oh, Lord Thanington, you *do* understand, don't you ? You can see it's a little difficult, and that I'm in rather an awkward position, can't you ? It isn't that I'm ungrateful. I've never been so happy as I've been lately, through your kindness and Lady Joanna's. But I can't pretend to be able to dress and to live as Lady Joanna's friends do ; and a magnificent diamond ornament on one of the plain frocks I wear would, I'm afraid, make people laugh at me."

She was conscious already, poor little woman, of a certain dowdiness of cut in the very muslin dress she was wearing ; and, indeed, the feeling that, as regarded dress, she was by no means on a level with her present surroundings, was one of the strictly feminine reasons why she was glad that the play was over, and that she could retire into her husband's more modest walk of life.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"I don't think they'd laugh at you," said the earl, gently, playing with the flowers still left in his hand. "But I do appreciate your difficulty, my dear child; indeed I've thought it over before now, and understood your graceful forbearance in not worrying your husband to buy you dresses which he can't well afford."

Nannie smiled up with bright intelligence.

"You do see that, don't you?" she said, delighted at his tone of sympathetic understanding. "It isn't that they're not good enough to wear, but that they're not good enough to wear *here*," she added ingenuously. "They'll look all right again in Bredinsbury."

The earl smiled and gave her a gentle touch on the shoulder which was a sort of appreciative pat on the back.

"You're quite right," said he, "quite right. I never knew so young a woman speak with such absolute good sense. But you must remember this: you owe it, not only to yourself, but to your husband, to keep up as well as you can the social position which you have already so cleverly made. You will have, therefore, to come out here sometimes, and you will have to dress as well as you can always. Remember a professional man's position depends as much upon his wife as it does upon himself; a good wife can do wonders for her husband, and one very important item consists in keeping up a good appearance."

"Yes, I see that," said Nannie, earnestly. "And," she added with a laugh, "you can trust a woman, Lord Thanington, not to let her husband be too mean as regards her dress allowance. My trouble with Peter," she added simply, "will always be to make him mean enough."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"You're right again. Of course you don't want to burden him by extravagance in the way of dress. At the same time you will sometimes find it hard to manage on a small allowance. Now, I do hope that if you should ever find it difficult to make both ends meet, and yet feel that you're not justified in worrying your husband by an appeal for money, that you will remember that there's an old friend of your husband's and of his father's ready to lend you what you want, and that a word or a line to me at any time——"

Deceived by her confiding manner and tone, he had gone a little too far. Nannie drew herself up unconsciously, and a deep flush came into her face, while she said, not indeed stiffly or indignantly, but with great promptitude :

"Borrow from you ! Oh, Lord Thanington, I should never think of asking that !"

He shrugged his shoulders slightly, and recovered himself in a moment.

"Wouldn't you ? Well, as you like. But you might do so with perfect propriety considering that I am so many years older than you, and that I am always more or less in your husband's debt for the work he does for me."

Nannie looked round her uneasily. She wanted to get back to the crowd, to see her husband ; she began to think she must have been in the palm-house a long time. And as her eyes wandered round they met those of Shirley Brede, who was standing on the other side of a clump of tall palms, and who appeared to be peering at her and her companion through the branches. The moment she saw him, however, he came quickly round

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

to Nannie, and begged her to give him the first dance.

"Is the piece over, then?" asked the earl.

"Yes, and every one is asking where you've got to," retorted Shirley, as he marched off with Nannie on his arm.

He was profuse in his compliments, declared that, although he had felt sure she would be very good, he had had no idea how good she was going to be in the part she had played; and, proud of having the first dance with the heroine of the evening, he devoted himself to her with that boyish ardor which was so prominent a part of his character, and jealously guarded her from the approaches of the men who were anxious to pay her their homage on her success.

"You'll find it jolly hard to settle down to quiet life with Peter in the old house after this," was his daring comment as they made their first steps in the waltz.

Nannie forgot even to protest against his familiar use of her husband's name. But it suddenly occurred to her to wonder what had become of him, and she looked round the ball-room in vain.

"I wonder where he is?" said she. "I want to know what he thought of—of the piece."

"You mean of *you*," laughed Shirley. "Well, I can tell you that he looked intensely displeased during the performance, and that I don't think he'll let you act again."

"But why?" asked Nannie, with sudden anxiety in her face and voice.

"I think he objected to your being exposed to criticism, no matter how complimentary," said Shirley.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"You see, a lot of people here didn't know who he was, and I dare say he heard a good many remarks which wouldn't have been made if he had been known to be your husband."

Nannie looked more alarmed than ever.

"I should like to go and look for him," said she, trying to stop in the dance.

But Shirley would not allow this.

"We really can't go hunting in all the corners for him now," said he, airily. "The best of husbands will keep, you know. He's probably in the card-room—I'm sure old Peter plays whist—beauties' husbands always do."

"I don't like the way you're talking at all," said Nannie, sharply, "and unless you speak differently I won't go on dancing with you."

"I will speak differently, I will, I promise!" cried Shirley, with prompt and eager docility. "You'll let me take you in to supper, won't you?"

"N—n—no, I think I'd rather not," said Nannie. "I don't think Peter would like me to be talking to you half the evening."

"Do you think he wouldn't rather see you at supper with me than spending three-quarters of an hour in the palm-house with Thanington?" retorted Shirley, saucily. "Come, you've kicked over the traces, now you know, and I don't see why I should be snubbed, when people compared with whom I'm a model of discretion are allowed to pin their flowers in your dress."

"There! Now I won't dance another step with you! And I won't speak to you again to-night," cried Nannie, in hot anger and confusion. "Nobody with any sense

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

of honor would play the spy, and nobody with any other sort of sense would see any harm in my taking flowers from Lord Thanington, who gives them to everybody."

"Of course they wouldn't see any harm, nor did I," said Shirley, in a wheedling tone, as he followed closely at her heels, and made himself, with perfect good-humor, thoroughly ridiculous by the nimble manner in which he skipped out of the way of her train, as he went on talking eagerly and pleadingly to her. "I never see any harm in anything, you know. Oh, don't be cross! don't 'ee now."

And Nannie having imprudently taken refuge in a bay window, which was open to the night air, in one of the drawing-rooms adjoining the room where the dancing was going on, he hemmed her in, and went on coaxing and apologizing until, for very impulse to laugh at his mock earnestness, she could hold out no longer.

The moment he obtained a sort of grudging forgiveness for his misdeeds he had tact enough to turn the conversation in a new direction.

"Was my friend, Miss Pemberton, here to-night?" he asked.

"Oh, no," said Nannie. "How can you ask such a thing? Of course she could have had an invitation if she'd liked, but when Peter suggested it, she said she thanked Heaven she wasn't one of those women who were ready to spend a fortune on a dress in order to ape their betters for one evening."

"People of that sort are always thanking Heaven for something," remarked Shirley, "though they never seem grateful. I must look the dear girl up some of

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

these days, I really must. Oh, hang it all ! here's the Major ; come to ask you to dance, I'll be sworn !”

It was the Major in high good-humor with the pupil who did him so much credit ; and Nannie was back in the ballroom the next minute.

She had more partners than she could dance with, she had more admiration accorded her than she had ever dreamt of in all her young life. But the way was not all of roses. Some of the ladies were critical of her looks, but that was nothing : in the face of the success she had had Nannie could afford to smile at this. But there were weak points about her appearance which her feminine rivals seized with acuteness ; she heard a whisper that she was “ provincial,” and more than one that her dress was “ dowdy.” And not all the admiring glances of the men, who would have worshiped her in sackcloth, could take the sting out of these comments of the better-dressed women whom she had cut out.

She had been long enough among the Greyfriars’ “ set ” to know that, while strict simplicity is a great charm in a young woman, it must be the simplicity of good style and good cut, and not the simplicity of the Board School nor of the dairymaid.

She only caught sight of Peter once during the evening, and then he looked tired and bored and rather cross. He had been, as Shirley suggested, carried off to the card-room, not of his own free will, but in good-natured submission to the wish of three old bores who wanted a fourth man to play whist with them. When he at last came to Nannie and asked her whether she was not ready to go home, she saw that he was ill-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

pleased, and agreed at once, though she had to disappoint a promised partner.

When they got into the cab, he leaned back, apparently tired out, and it was with some timidity that Nannie said :

“ Well, Peter, you never came near me to tell me how you thought I acted.”

“ I don't think you were very anxious to know,” said Peter, rather gruffly. “ You disappeared when the piece was over, and I couldn't find you anywhere.”

Nannie was silent. She did not wish to pursue this topic. Presently she said, “ Well, what did you think of me ? ”

“ Oh, you did it very well, of course. But, Nannie, I don't quite like it. I don't like the way the men have of discussing an actress, even an amateur. And —well, I don't like to hear myself spoken of, as I did once or twice this evening, as ‘ Mrs. Pemberton's husband.’ ”

“ Oh, well, you know it's all over now,” sighed out Nannie, with an attempt at comfort which was rather a whimpering one, as she in her turn gave a little regretful sigh and closed her eyes to keep the moisture back.

Of course she was glad it was safely over, and now she could settle down quietly to life in her pretty house and to Peter.

But——

CHAPTER XVII.

It was a long time before Nannie could sleep that night. She was still in a state of furious excitement, living through now one scene and now another of that eventful night, until long after the rays of morning had begun to steal through the blinds.

She thought of the brilliant scene in the little theater, of the audience dazzling in jewels, of the perfume of flowers that came to her over the real footlights as if in a dream. She remembered the laughter and applause, the loud outburst of talk which rose the moment the curtain fell and before the applause had subsided. Then she went over the play, act by act, wishing she had done better in this place, recalling with pleasure the effect she had made in that, wondering whether she would ever act again !

Then she recalled word by word the interview with the earl, and Shirley's mocking, irritating references to it. He was wrong, she was sure, quite wrong, and his accusations against Lord Thanington were merely the result of jealousy ; for it was well known that Shirley much resented that any woman he liked should bestow the least mark of attention or liking on any man but himself.

For what had Lord Thanington said ? Everything that a kindly-disposed man who was an old friend of her husband's should say. The person of whom he had

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

spoken most kindly was Peter ; he had extolled her for her devotion to her husband. Not by one word had he attempted to divert her thoughts—so Nannie told herself—from her husband to himself ; not by one suggestion had he made her think he had any idea of making love to her.

Nannie did not forget a look she had seen on his face which had made her withdraw her eyes ; she, however, thought it only loyal to put that into the background, and to dwell upon his kindness, as expressed towards Peter and herself.

As for his proposal that she should come to him if she wanted money, he had turned it off so cleverly that Nannie could not but think that it had been made in all honesty of purpose, and, while it was an offer which she, of course, could not think of accepting, she hoped she had not given Lord Thanington the impression that she saw in it anything but a wish to do her a kindness in a harmless way.

All the same, Nannie wished he had not made the suggestion, as it was one which she could not possibly mention to Peter, and she did not like having to keep even such a little thing a secret from him. She was always frank to the verge of daring in repeating to her husband all that passed at Greyfriars, even to the compliments paid her, and Shirley Brede's mock sighs and silly speeches ; he always joined her in laughing, and enjoyed her lively accounts of her doings, and believed that, while she continued to be so frank, nothing in the Greyfriars' atmosphere could do her any harm.

The very fact that Peter did not press her for information as to where she had been just after the perform-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

ance of "The Tyranny of Tears" showed how strong his confidence in her was, and how easy it would be to deceive him. Once indeed, as she lay reviewing the events of the evening, she decided that she would tell her husband everything, and try to let him see the earl's offer in the same light as she herself did.

But with daylight came a sudden timidity, which prevented her carrying out this resolve ; and Peter remained untold.

Peter, of course, had quite recovered from his ill-humor when morning came, and he apologized for it to Nannie on the ground that he had gone tired from a long day at the office to Greyfriars, and had been disappointed at having to pass the whole evening without a word to her.

"All the rest of them seemed to be luckier in that respect than I was," said he, with an affectionate smile, as he stroked her pretty head. "I wish somebody would set the fashion of dancing with one's own wife."

"How absurd, Peter ! I'm sure you see more than enough of me at home !" laughed Nannie.

"Indeed I don't," retorted he, with conviction.

"Well, you will now," said Nannie, trying to repress a slight regret at the thought of the merry days that were past.

"I don't know about that," said Peter. "I've had more work than ever lately, and I seem likely to have still more. I expect to have to bring some of my office work home with me in future, for the time at any rate. I'm afraid you will begin to feel neglected, dear. And when I do see you I'm always so tired out that I'm duller than ever."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"You're never dull to me, Peter," said Nannie, affectionately.

He laughed.

"That's because you carry your own liveliness about with you," said he. "I shall quite miss your accounts of the doings at Greyfriars. And you'll miss them too, I'm afraid. Will the Bredinsbury tea-parties be enough amusement for you for a little while, do you think?"

"They'll have to be," said Nannie, stoutly.

But when Peter had started for the office, and she had performed her household duties, she began to understand the void in her life which she would soon feel now that the excitement of the rehearsals was over.

It was not that she felt it already, for she was still under the influence of her late enjoyment; but it was with a sense of the dulness of the days in store for her that she went up-stairs, and, after one peep at her crescent and a little sigh of content that she had not to give it back, laid out her dresses in review, with the idea of noting what amount of damage they had suffered from the wear and tear of the past few months.

The result of her survey was by no means satisfactory. The one grand dress which Peter had had made in London for the dinner-party, and which Nannie had only worn once since, stood out in high relief, having this advantage, that it was as much too good for ordinary wear as the other gowns were—alas!—too bad.

For the pretty Paris dress had seen much service, having, indeed, been her *pièce de résistance* ever since her home-coming with Peter. And the others, the simple white and gray cottons, and the historic muslin, which had come in for so much criticism on the

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

previous evening, these were unmistakably and hopelessly dowdy.

There remained, indeed a simple gray cashmere tea-gown, which she had had made for the opening of "The Tyranny of Tears," and with this she was in the main contented, as it would serve for her own home dress for the afternoon for many a day. But for the rest, since she could do nothing to turn a white silk dress into a costume for outdoor wear, they remained a miserable collection of washed-out and shabby-looking clothes, in which there was not a single garment in which she would feel comfortable when she made her next round of calls.

Now Nannie was by no means specially vain or selfish, the best possible proof of this lay in the fact that she could have had a new gown for the asking, if she had not felt unwilling to impose upon her husband's kindness. But it was inevitable that clothes, which formed such an important item in the thoughts and in the conversation of the people among whom she had of late chiefly lived, should now have usurped a much more important place in her own thoughts than had been the case in the old days at Preston, when all the women of her own circle were satisfied with two frocks, one for weekdays and one for Sundays, for months at a time and for years in succession.

When she had finished her inspection, Nannie stood up suddenly, with an air of resolution which might have befitted Joan of Arc at the stake.

"It's all the better!" cried she to herself aloud, as she caught up an armful of the old frocks and made a dash for the wardrobe to shut them out of sight. "If

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

I'd had as many as I wanted I should have thought of them too much. And now I can be good and think of nothing but Peter !”

For she had been reproaching herself for thinking too little of Peter, and had told him so ; but he had answered truly enough that thinking about him wouldn't have been of much use, and that a bright face to welcome him and a merry tongue to cheer him up were the best homage she could pay to her notions of her duty as a wife.

Full, however, of her own new resolutions of devotion, Nannie fled down the stairs to the study, and busied herself in adding little finishing touches to the room, so that if he should have, poor dear boy, to bring his nasty work home with him, as he feared, he should at least work in a room that didn't look just like the office.

So she brought the darkest of the drawing-room cushions and put it into the desk chair, and filled a couple of vases with flowers for the mantelpiece, and sharpened a couple of pencils, and went out and bought a box of pens, saw that the inkstand was freshly filled, and then sat down with a sigh to think that she could do no more.

And then the morning seemed long till Peter came over to luncheon, and was filled with admiration and gratitude at her thoughtfulness.

“ I know you won't be able to write with that cushion in your chair, and I expect you will use some particular pen of your own, and that you would rather be without the flowers,” admitted Nannie, with the sparkle of fun in her eyes, “ but I wanted to do *something*, no matter how idiotic, to show you how sorry I feel that you

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

should have to work so hard, just because you've married a girl not half good enough for you, and that you want to treat her as if she were a million times better than she is !”

Peter laughed rather mischievously as he patted her shoulder and gave her a kiss.

“ It's very nice of you to credit me with such noble motives,” said he. “ But the fact is, Nannie, there's more pride than anything else in what I've done. I like the feeling that *my* wife shall have the best of everything ; and so she shall, too, God bless her !”

Nannie was touched, and answered with the tears near her eyes, and with an odd sort of remorsefulness that seemed charming to her young husband, who, good fellow, could not guess all the secret springs of emotion which surged up in his wife's heart. If he had, he might have been alarmed to think of the perils into which his very generosity, his very trust and pride in her, were throwing the treasure of his heart, the pretty young wife whom he adored.

As it turned out, therefore, the first day after the grand doings at Greyfriars passed off happily enough, with its own emotions, its own excitements, to give a zest to life. And the few following days, before the pleasant influences of the great events were over, passed satisfactorily enough.

But when the glow had faded away, and Peter had begun to be absorbed in his work to an unprecedented extent, and nobody came from Greyfriars to see Nannie, and her duty calls were paid and even the discussion of the celebrated theatricals had come to an end, then indeed the young wife did begin to feel that her occupa-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

tion was gone, and to wonder whether the days were always going to be so very much alike and so very dull.

She had paid a call on Lady Joanna, but that was always a penance, for the manner of the earl's daughter grew drier than ever, and there was nobody there to soften the effect of her uncompromising hardness and openly-expressed delight that the "dreadful bore" of the play and the ball was over.

And then the days went on, and it began to seem strange to Nannie that nobody from Greyfriars came to see her. For it had been the custom of late for one or other of the ladies staying there, the permanent house-party, as Lady Joanna often called them, to drop in and have tea at the old gabled house when they drove into Bredinsbury. And as Shirley Brede and one of the other men were often of the party, on some pretext of rehearsal or the like, things had been lively for Nannie at home as well as abroad.

She had grown a little uneasy at this neglect, never guessing, poor child, that this system had been instituted by Lord Thanington, on the pretense that Pemberton wished his wife to rest a little after the hard work and excitement of the performance. The earl had his own reasons for wishing to impress upon poor little Nannie the amount to which she was indebted, for the light and color in her life, to Greyfriars.

There were plenty of spying eyes, however, to note this apparent neglect, and to put their own kind and charitable interpretation upon it. And when some of the comments of the neighbors reached Miss Pemberton's ears, she took care, all for the good of her nephew's wife, that they should reach hers also.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Nannie always dreaded the spinster's visits, and when that austere lady made her appearance one afternoon, for the first time since the theatricals, with a somewhat less dry manner than usual, Nannie guessed immediately that she intended to make herself more disagreeable than usual.

Her apprehensions were well founded.

"I suppose you've been expecting me to call before this," Miss Pemberton began, when she was sipping her tea, "to ask how you got on at that theatrical entertainment?"

"Oh, no. I know those things don't interest you," said Nannie.

"I can't say they do particularly. But whether or no, I've heard a great deal about them, from one person and another. It seems that you lost your place once or twice."

"I did forget a word once in the second act," said Nannie, reddening. "But it didn't matter much. There was only a moment's pause."

"Ah, well, of course they made allowances. They couldn't expect you to be very good, when you hadn't done that sort of thing before. Now, they tell me Lady Cressage was splendid; that the people laughed whenever she spoke."

"She was playing the comedy part," said Nannie, trying hard not to show any vexation at her visitor's wilful perversion of facts. "If they hadn't laughed, it would have shown she was acting badly. If they had laughed at everything I said, it would have proved I was acting badly."

"Oh, well, my dear, I'm sure I'm very glad you were

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

so well pleased with yourself," said Miss Pemberton. "Especially as you did not think it necessary to wear your best dress, and were satisfied to appear in a muslin which they say didn't fit."

The tears rose to Nannie's eyes, but she fought to keep them back. This was a stab indeed.

"I couldn't wear an evening dress, with a low bodice, when it was supposed to be daytime," said Nannie, quietly, "and then spending the evening very quietly with my husband and an old friend, in a quiet, everyday household. Lady Cressage wore a perfectly plain dress too."

"Oh, well, of course you knew best. But it must have been annoying to you to hear that you didn't look nice."

"It would have been, if I had heard that," said Nannie, with spirit. "But I heard some opinions which were quite different."

"I'm very glad to hear it. I thought at the time that perhaps it wasn't true, and I hope it's not true either that the Greyfriars people have dropped you altogether since the performance."

"What do you mean by 'dropped me'?" asked Nannie, with flashing eyes.

"Oh, my dear, don't be cross. It's better for you to hear what people say, isn't it? And then you will understand your position better. They say Lady Joanna doesn't like you, and that she's never been near you, or asked you out there since that evening. People think, you know, that she just made use of you for the piece, and that, now it is over, she doesn't mean to trouble herself about you any more."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"People are very kind, I'm sure!" cried Nannie, controlling herself with difficulty. "I don't suppose Lady Joanna is any fonder of me than I am of her, and that's not saying much."

Miss Pemberton gave an irritating little laugh. Though aware that she was goading Nannie to madness, she was quite satisfied with her own action in telling her these things, believing that she was doing her duty in "taking" the young wife "down a peg" and in teaching her her true position.

"Oh, my dear Anne," said she, "how can you be so absurd? How can you compare yourself to Lady Joanna? *Her* liking matters very much to you, but *yours* matters nothing whatever to her, you know."

But she was so very venomous, all, of course, with the best intentions, that Nannie suddenly began to see the comicality of the situation, and instead of showing further resentment, burst into a merry laugh.

"Well, Miss Pemberton," she said, "you ought to be very much pleased to think that I've covered myself with disgrace by my bad dressing and bad acting, for now there remains nothing for me but to spend my time quietly at home picking up crumbs from the carpets and looking through the blinds at my neighbors."

This was a bold carrying of the war into the enemy's quarters, for both these occupations were among those to which her visitor was most prone. While Miss Pemberton pinched up her mouth and drew herself up, Nannie added, "I hope you won't forget to tell Peter what a general failure and disgrace to him I've proved, for it's just as important for you to open his eyes as to open mine, you know."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Miss Pemberton had the sense to perceive, not without inward consternation, that she had overshot her mark. She became at once more conciliatory, and though Nannie did not pretend to be as cordial as she had always tried to be before to Peter's aunt, a sort of hollow peace was patched up between the two ladies before Miss Pemberton went away.

It was inevitable, of course, that the words she had uttered should have more sting when Nannie was left to herself than they had had in the heat of battle. The young wife brooded over them, worried herself about the neglect of the Greyfriars "set," and was more than once tempted to confide her troubles to Peter.

She always refrained, however, now from one motive and now from another; he had his own worries over his work, for one thing, and she did not feel justified in troubling the overworked man with her own trifling distresses, which she liked to try to persuade herself were partly imaginary.

But it was a real blow when, some two or three weeks after the performance, she passed Lord Thanington and Shirley Brede in the principal street of Bredinsbury, and they contented themselves with raising their hats and passed without a word.

Nannie was dismayed. It was the first time that such a thing had happened. Their usual custom when they met her was to rein in their horses, whether they were riding or driving, and stop for a few minutes' chat. And the poor child asked herself, as she walked quickly back to the shelter of the four walls of her home, what it was that she had done, or left undone, to have brought upon herself this strange series of slights.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

When Peter came home that evening, he pinched her cheek and told her she looked pale. Nannie bit her lip and said she didn't.

"What Lord Thanington says is quite true," said he. Nannie started at the name. "You don't look well."

"What, have you seen him to-day?" asked Nannie, quickly.

"Yes. He was with me a long time on business. But before he went away he mentioned that he had passed you in the street, and he gave me a good scolding about you."

"A scolding!" echoed Nannie.

"Yes. He said I had no business to let you walk about the streets by yourself, that I didn't deserve to have a pretty wife if I didn't treat her better than that."

"What! What did he mean?" gasped Nannie.

"Why, he said you ought to have a carriage."

"Oh, what nonsense!"

"And a proper dress allowance."

"Oh!"

"He said I should be quite justified in——"

"But you wouldn't! I shouldn't think of allowing you! A carriage, indeed! And for you to have to work till you can scarcely hold up your head just for me to grow more extravagant than I've been already. No, no, no, I sha'n't allow it! You sha'n't do it! Not for twenty Lord Thaningtons!" cried Nannie, as in a sort of rage, which was a strange mingling of pity and remorse and resolution, she flung her arms round her husband's neck.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PETER soothed his wife as well as he could.

He could not but be conscious that she had suffered a good deal lately, through the abrupt change from the gay life at Greyfriars to the dead monotony of long days and long evenings passed by herself, broken only by an uninteresting exchange of duty calls with the ladies in the neighborhood. However pleased Nannie might be at the kindness with which these quiet country ladies had received her, intercourse with them seemed of necessity rather colorless compared with the gayer and brighter life of the earl's household.

Peter said very little, therefore, as he dried her tears, beyond telling her that she was a silly child who didn't know what was good for her. She persisted so strongly, however, in refusing to let him spend any more money upon her just then, that he began to suspect that his aunt, of whose attitude towards her he was aware, must have been reproaching her for extravagance.

So he took occasion upon the following morning to interview Miss Pemberton, on his arrival at the office, before beginning the work of the day.

"Aunt," he began with a solemnity of manner which put her on the alert at once as to the object of his errand, "I want a few words with you about Nannie."

Miss Pemberton pinched up her mouth, sat down on a chair, but said nothing to help him out.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"I've been obliged to neglect her a good deal lately, as you know, since I've had so much work on my hands, and I'm afraid she's been moping a little. I spoke to her yesterday about getting herself a new dress, and something else I wanted her to have," he went on cautiously, not daring to mention the proposed carriage, "and instead of being pleased, in the natural way, she burst out crying and refused. Now, I don't want to do you injustice, but I've been wondering whether, in your kind anxiety to spare my purse, you had suggested to her that she had been spending too much money."

"Certainly not," said Miss Pemberton, stiffly. "On the contrary, I mentioned the surprise people felt that she didn't dress better for the theatrical performance so much talked about."

Peter frowned.

"You shouldn't have told her that. You should have tried to be nice to her," he said shortly. "You are the very person to whom she ought naturally to look for advice and kindness, and for some reason or other you never meet her without trying to rub her up the wrong way, and so making it impossible that she can feel any confidence in you, as I should like her to do."

Miss Pemberton gave a short grunt.

"If your wife had ever shown the least desire to look to me for advice, I'm sure I should have been only too ready to give it," she said with asperity. "She seems, however, to choose her confidants not here, but at Greyfriars, and not among ladies, but among gentlemen."

Peter eyed his aunt steadily.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, with that steely coldness which always disturbed her serenity.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

She hesitated a moment and dropped her eyelids. Then she spoke boldly :

“ I suppose you will put more blame upon me for telling you this than you will upon your wife for what she has done. Still, if you insist, I must frankly tell you that her conduct on the night of the performance set people gossiping. It seems she was away with Lord Thanington in the grounds for ever so long while you were playing cards. One of the gentlemen caught them, and Lord Thanington appeared to be making love to her. Oh, yes, it's of no use to look at me like that. If it's gossip only, you had better do something to put a stop to it if you can. If it isn't gossip, why doesn't Lady Joanna visit her now as she used to do ? ”

She had hurried out her words, doggedly resolved that she must now speak out, but frightened by their effect upon her nephew. The blow was an appalling one to Peter. That his wife, his darling wife, should be the subject of idle and venomous gossip, was an idea so shocking, so repulsive, that it was true, as Miss Pemberton felt, that his first impulse was one of furious anger against her for having dared to repeat the slander. He had self-command enough, however, not to speak, with the exception of a muttered ejaculation, until he had walked to the window and given the matter a few moments' thought. Then he came back to her with suddenness which made her flinch.

“ Who did you hear this from ? ”

“ Oh, I—I think——”

“ No evasions, please. Who told you this ? ”

“ Do you want to set all the town by the ears ? ”

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

asked Miss Pemberton, trembling for the effects of her own indiscretion.

"Never mind what I want. Who told you this story?"

She made her reply to this with very little delay, giving the names of two ladies of the neighborhood, with no special reputation of being scandal-mongers over and above their share in that inordinate interest in their neighbors' affairs, which is one of the special blessings of a clerical neighborhood. Even before she had uttered them, there flashed through Miss Pemberton's mind a sudden vivid terror as to what the effects would be upon her nephew if he ever found his wife guilty of a more grave indiscretion.

For Peter's usually quiet eyes seemed to blaze at her words, and he held her own in a penetrating gaze which made her shiver and feel sick.

"Of course, Peter," she said in a much lower voice, when he at last let her turn her head away, "it's only a trifling matter, no doubt."

"It's no trifling matter for my wife to be gossiped about, nor for you to repeat such things unless you believed they were true," retorted Peter, sternly.

"I mean, of course, it was only an indiscretion brought upon her by the life she's been allowed to lead lately, in my opinion a very undesirable life for a young wife to lead," said Miss Pemberton, plucking up a spirit.

But Peter would not allow her to lecture him.

"I'm the best judge of that," he said shortly. "You will be good enough, I hope, not to join in any more tattling bouts at my wife's expense."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

And before his aunt could recover from her indignation at this infamous charge, Peter had left her to herself, and, going down-stairs, shut himself into his office.

The nature of the young solicitor was a dogged one, and he was able, by a strong effort, to apply himself to his daily work, rigidly closing the doors to all thoughts of this domestic cloud until he went back home to luncheon. But it nevertheless hung over him, affecting him unconsciously, making him gloomy and irritable. When once he had closed the doors of the little house behind him, he went down the street at racing pace, and dashed into his wife's presence so suddenly that she uttered a little exclamation of surprise.

She was lying down on the sofa in the big drawing-room. It was a raw November day, and the outlook of this room being to the north, the room was cold and dark, for the fire in the grate had been neglected and was smoldering miserably.

Peter, as he crossed the room towards her, saw that she looked pale and cold, and his mood changed at once.

"Aren't you well, dear?" he asked, sitting beside her on the couch, the moment she had placed herself in a sitting position.

"Oh, yes, Peter, quite well. Only I'm cold, and my head aches. And you came in so suddenly that you frightened me."

All the difficulties that lie in the way of treating a very young wife with the proper meed of tenderness, firmness and consideration, crowded upon the young husband at once, as he put his arm round Nannie, and looking down into her face, saw that it was pinched and

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

less pretty than usual ; while the hand he took in his startled him by its coldness.

" You *are* ill, I believe," said he anxiously. " Here, ring for one of the girls to do something to the fire. No, I'll do it myself."

And with the beautiful self-sufficiency of the male in household matters, he was down on his knees in a moment, blowing and poking little bits of stick into the black mass, and contriving screens of newspaper to increase the draught, while his eyes wandered anxiously from time to time towards Nannie, who, in a languid sort of way, was laughing at his efforts.

Every moment was making it more difficult for him to approach the delicate subject of Miss Pemberton's communication. But it must be done. He felt that if he waited he should never have courage to attack it at all ; every moment that she sat there looking so plain, listless and unlike herself seemed to increase the difficulty of uttering words which might seem to convey reproach.

At last he said, " Nannie, I want to say something and get it over."

It cut him like a stab to see that she looked frightened, that her lips seemed to grow paler, as he said this.

" Yes, what is it ?" said she.

" Is it true that, on the night of the performance, you were a long time out in the grounds with Lord Thanington ?"

" No, it isn't true," said she, quickly, with a look of relief.

" I knew it wasn't," retorted Peter, with more relief still. " But, Nannie, what made them say it ?"

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

She answered without evasion at once :

“ I was in the palm-house talking to him while he cut a lot of flowers for me. Then Mr. Brede came in and took me away to dance.”

“ And it isn’t true, of course, that you let him make love to you ? ”

“ Of course it isn’t,” answered Nannie, with so much genuine anger that the burden was at once lifted from Peter’s heart. “ He was most kind and nice, and he wanted to go and look for you that you might be the first person to congratulate me about my acting.”

Peter, who was still in a most unheroic attitude, sitting on his heels on the hearthrug with a charred stick of firewood in one hand, tossed the wood away and made a dart towards her on his knees. The look of tumultuous happiness in his quivering face frightened Nannie as much as his previous sternness had done.

“ Thank God ! I knew it was all right,” he whispered hoarsely, as he buried his face in the bosom of her dress. “ But oh, Nannie, if you knew—if you knew how I felt when—when——”

His voice was stifled, he could not go on. Nannie caressed his face, but her fingers were trembling. This overflowing, deep-seated passion seemed to overwhelm her by its very depth, its unaccountableness. She loved her husband, as it was impossible to help loving a companion so devoted, so kind. But the depths of passion in him had as yet appealed to no answering depth in the woman of scarce nineteen.

To his consternation, she suddenly burst into tears.

“ I know very well who’s done this, who’s tried to set you against me by repeating all the tittle-tattle she

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

hears, and adding to it," she sobbed. "Oh, yes, you can't deny it. I know it's your aunt. I hate her! I'll never let her come here again!"

Peter wisely said little to this, except to tell her not to cry, and not to distress herself, and to remember that all the tittle-tattle in the world could not affect his love and his trust.

"But they can! They did!" cried Nannie. "I think you might be satisfied now I never see any of them, and just sit here all day passing my time as much like Miss Pemberton as possible."

Peter laughed at this little snap, but he felt sorry, too, and angry with his aunt, whose position was certainly anything but that of a peacemaker.

And a few days later he sealed his peace with his wife in the prettiest manner. For Nannie, looking out of the window one day in surprise at hearing a carriage drive up just before luncheon, saw a neat little brougham at the door, out of which Peter stepped with a beaming face which proclaimed his secret; the brougham and the little bay mare which drew it were for Nannie.

There was no resisting the power of such a tonic as that; and young Mrs. Pemberton, who had been growing more and more listless and averse from going out, now recovered some at least of her old spirits, as she drove about in her new carriage, in a new dress which Peter insisted on her having, "to be in keeping with the turnout."

She was stepping out of the brougham one day, on her return from a drive, when she was filled with pleasure and excitement at the sight of Major Murray on the doorstep.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

He had come, he said, to ask if she would play in a charitable performance to be given at Castleton, a seaport and garrison town near. With flutterings of regret which she would not acknowledge, Nannie felt bound to refuse; but her face betrayed so plainly with what reluctance she did so, that the Major would not take no for an answer, but told her she must think it over, and he would write to her about it in a few days, with more details.

He had not been gone long when Peter came home, and Nannie at once told him about the Major's visit. She spoke rapidly, and with subdued excitement which betrayed the interest she had felt in the project, although she dismissed the matter as lightly as she could.

"But why did you refuse?" asked Peter.

For answer Nannie burst into tears.

"What!" sobbed she, "after all the nasty things your aunt has said, and that she says other people have said, how could I? There was nothing to be done but to refuse. Don't let's talk any more about it. I told the Major I should never act any more."

"Then you told him what isn't true," said Peter, quietly. "Come, Nannie, be reasonable. If I've no objection to your acting, nobody else can have any. When the Major writes again, if he does, you can tell him you'll be delighted. And I know you will, dear."

It was some time before Nannie would consent to doing what she knew she would like to do. She had been so depressed by the long-continued desertion of her Greyfriars friends, so much hurt by the suspicion Miss Pemberton had roused in Peter's mind, and so much frightened by the mountain which local gossip

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

had made of a mole-hill, that her bright spirits had been for the time completely crushed, and she had fallen into a state of wretchedness from which all her dutiful efforts had failed to rouse her.

Even the prospect of the new and congenial occupation, indeed, did not entirely restore to Nannie the old feelings of delight and interest which had made the rehearsals of "The Tyranny of Tears" a period of delight, not only to herself, but to Peter, who had reveled in her racy accounts of the doings at Greyfriars.

She set about her new task with greater gravity, and with such energy that her health suffered, and it became rather the rule than the exception for Peter to find her on the sofa after a couple of hours' steady study.

The piece which the Castleton amateurs were to play was "Lady Windermere's Fan," and Nannie was to be the young wife. It was the energetic Major Murray himself, who was stationed with his regiment at Bredinsbury, who was to get it up, and the company consisted of officers from among those at Bredinsbury and Castleton, while the smaller ladies' parts were filled by the wives of some of them, and Lady Cressage, who for no particular reason had great fame as an actress, played Mrs. Erlynne.

The rehearsals took place at the house of the lady who played the "Duchess," and Nannie congratulated herself upon the fact that, as two out of the four acts required evening dress, she would be able at last to use the famous white silk.

When she spoke about dress to the major, however, she was told that she was entitled to have one new

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

dress paid for by the organizers of the entertainment, in return for her expenses.

"You're our 'star,' you know," said he, "and I'm really grateful to you for coming. I don't say it to flatter you, but you're new, and that's a great thing. And you come with the prestige of your Greyfriars' performance upon you."

"I don't know what my husband will say, though, to my having a dress provided."

"Lady Cressage and Mrs. Locksley are each having one."

"Are they? Oh, well, then, I dare say he won't mind my having one too."

When the ladies came to discuss the important matter of the dresses together, the major came among them in his usual dictatorial fashion, and asked them to give him details of the colors and materials they proposed to wear. Nannie had resolved upon a cashmere morning-dress for the first act, of an old rose shade, with white lace, this being an effective contrast to the dark green which Lady Cressage intended to wear.

In the second and third acts Nannie was going to wear her own white evening dress and cloak, and in the fourth she proposed to wear another simple dress of some woolen material. The major, however, said he should be glad if she would wear gray velvet, with bands of sable and tabs of point lace.

Nannie objected strongly, on the ground of the expense. But the major said that was the dress the committee proposed to provide, and gave her the name of a smart London dressmaker to whom, he said, she was to go for it.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Of course she was delighted at this, and Lady Cressage, who was to wear scarlet cloth braided with black in the same scene, arranged that they should go to town together to be fitted.

Peter was heartily glad that Nannie should have got among her old friends again, in spite of Miss Pemberton's ominous looks. That lady did not at all approve of this fresh dissipation, but she did not dare to make any remark upon it, except to say gloomily that she hoped it would go off all right.

Nannie herself, however, did not throw herself so heartily into the fun this time as she had done on the previous occasion. She felt some compunction about neglecting Peter, in return for a similar feeling on his part, and her tread had no longer the same elasticity, nor her spirits the same buoyancy as before.

Though he would not say anything about it, Peter began to torment himself with doubts and fears, to ask himself whether Lord Thanington, whose reputation among the ladies was well known, had managed to insinuate himself into Nannie's affections against her own will and even her own knowledge, and whether the consciousness that her husband was not, after all, the chosen of her heart was beginning to fret her soul into regret and remorse.

He tried most loyally to stifle these fears, believing wholly in his young wife's goodness, and not anxious to believe anything but the best of his client and patron. But he could not entirely banish his doubts, and he was thankful that the performance was to take place far enough away from Greyfriars for there to be no fear of her meeting the earl again.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Nannie, of course, knew nothing of all this. She gave herself, as before, heart and soul to her work, submitted to the dictatorship of the major with her old docility, and felt a little glow of satisfaction when her new dress was sent home to her, fitting her like a glove, and making her look as distinguished as nature had made her pretty.

Peter came in to luncheon before she took it off, and was amazed at her magnificence.

"I say, Nannie, they do you in style, don't they? What on earth will the committee have to pay for that dress?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Nannie, dimpling with pleasure. "And I don't care either, since they chose to make me wear what they wanted and not what I chose myself. But it is nice, isn't it? And won't it make a splendid dress for calls through the winter?"

"But you won't be allowed to keep it, will you?" asked Peter, with some slight uneasiness. He did not like the idea of any committee paying for his wife's clothes.

"Oh, yes. Lady Cressage is going to, and Mrs. Locksley. You see they wouldn't be of any use to anybody else, and that's the way they pay us for the trouble of acting for them."

"Well, if they've treated the other two ladies as they've treated you, there won't be much surplus for the charity," said Peter.

"Oh, no, I believe there's never supposed to be," said Nannie, ingenuously.

There was great excitement at the last, and the only cloud to Nannie's enjoyment when the time came was

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

the fact that Peter could not leave the office to go with her to Castleton. However, there was no help for it, and she had to content herself by promising him a full and faithful account of the evening's events.

In the pride of her heart at having so many pretty dresses to wear, Nannie, just at the last moment, yielded to the temptation to put her crescent into her traveling-bag. She felt guilty in the act, but excused herself by saying that, as the earl would not be present, it couldn't matter. And, stuck in the side of the white silk bodice, it did make such a difference !

CHAPTER XIX.

A GREAT surprise awaited Nannie at the station. She had been told to be there by five o'clock, as all the Bredinsbury contingent of the amateurs were going to Castleton together, in a saloon which had been specially ordered.

What was her astonishment when, on arriving at the station, Shirley Brede, who had evidently been waiting for her, ran to open the door of the brougham, and seized her hand with the rapture of a long-lost brother.

"I said I wouldn't let anybody else meet you, not even Thanington!" cried he, in triumph. "But we're all inside, he and Mrs. Pontesbury, and Lady Joanna, and Mrs. Denby, and Lady Vi, and Sir Philip, and the whole gang, in fact. Come along. Where's a porter? Oh, yes, that's right. For Castleton; there's a special van, you know, for Lord Thanington."

"Is *he* going?" asked Nannie, in a rather dubious tone, wondering whether this fact, of the party being Lord Thanington's, would set Miss Pemberton's malicious tongue going again and annoy Peter.

"Course he is! It was he who was at the bottom of the whole thing, you know! And I shouldn't a bit wonder if he did it partly on your account, to show you off again, you know. He was awfully struck with your acting in 'The Tyranny of Tears,' and tremendously proud of having suggested it from the beginning."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

As Shirley rattled on, he led her through the station, insisted on carrying her bag himself, and saw her big dress-trunk labeled and wheeled off to the van. The moment Nannie stepped out on the platform she saw the well-known group on the other side of the rails, all smiling and waving their hands to her, and a sense of irrepressible pleasure came into her heart at the sight of the old faces.

Lord Thanington came right to the edge of the opposite platform, raising his hat and smiling her a welcome. Nannie was very silent and rather pale as she accompanied the talkative Shirley down the steps and through the tunnel.

"Aren't you glad to see us all again, and particularly me?" he began affectionately, putting his head on one side to look persuasively into her face.

"I'm glad to see you all again certainly," said she, laughing. "But why 'particularly you,' please?"

"Oh, well, I'm the oldest friend of all, except Thanington. And I've always been so fond of you! Come, don't you think you might give me a kiss, just to show we're friends?"

Nannie replied indignantly, but the very absurdity of the request set her laughing in spite of herself.

"Of course not. What a ridiculous thing to ask!"

"No, it isn't ridiculous. There's no harm in kissing an old fossil like me. If it were Thanington it might be different, but not me. Come, now!"

"Really I can't help laughing at your making yourself so perfectly idiotic, but I'm annoyed too. It's all very well to be amusing; but you shouldn't go so far as impertinence."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Why, nobody would see, down in this tunnel."

"That makes no difference whatever."

"Oh, yes, it does. Of course I shouldn't ask you to kiss me on the platform."

"You would be just as likely to get one there as here."

"Well, I think you're very unkind. Most women kiss me at once when I ask them."

"That would be quite reason enough for my not doing so, even if I hadn't a dozen better ones," retorted Nannie.

"Would it really? Well, well, you must have your own way, I suppose. But, I say, you won't tell Peter, will you, that I asked you?"

"Certainly I shall."

"Well, you are a nasty, disagreeable thing! Then he'll never let me come and see you again."

"Oh, yes, he will. He looks upon you as quite harmless."

"Then you might let me kiss you," retorted Shirley, brightening, and advancing his face, as if he fully expected permission to follow.

Nannie was obliged to run up the steps as fast as she could, for fear he should see how difficult it was for her to keep her countenance in the face of his highly indecorous but none the less amusing teasing. She could see by the twinkle in his eyes that he had known quite well how she would take his absurd advances; for in truth Nannie, with her perfect loyalty and at the same time her keen sense of fun, was able to enjoy the light surface talk of the idle and pleasant people she was among without the harm which Miss Pemberton insisted she must find there.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

On the platform the whole party from Greyfriars surrounded her, and it made her heart glow, after the distress she had felt of late at their desertion, to see that she was now received by them all in a different and highly flattering manner. For whereas in the old days she had always felt the difference there was still between these fine town ladies and herself, the country mouse, there was now, after the interval which had elapsed since their last meeting, no trace of this left. Each had some story to tell her of what had happened since they met her last; each did his or her best to let her see that she was now looked upon as a permanent member of "the set"; even Lady Joanna was almost cordial.

Mrs. East-Denby, who had not been at Greyfriars to see the celebrated performance, was particularly kind. She assured the young wife that she was most eager to see her act, complimented her upon what she was polite enough to call her "genius," and wanted to be allowed to help her to dress.

"I've had a lot of experience myself of acting and making up, in the old days," she added, "and I dare say I could be more useful to you than your own maid."

As little Nannie hadn't got a maid at all, this seemed highly probable; so her services were accepted, not, however, until Mrs. Denby had called Lord Thanington over from his place at the other end of the saloon to beg him to add his entreaties to hers.

The earl came at once, and sat on the edge of the table which stood in the middle of the saloon, looking down upon the two ladies.

"What am I wanted to do?" he asked, smiling, when

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

he had shaken hands with Nannie, which he had not 'done before.

"I want you to persuade Mrs. Pemberton to let me be her maid, her 'dresser,' as they say in the theaters, to-night. I could be of real use, couldn't I?"

"I'm sure you could. Mrs. Pemberton won't be obdurate, I'm sure, even though she has been inclined lately to treat us at Greyfriars rather shabbily."

Nannie turned suddenly white as she looked quickly up at him. Such an absolute reversal of the true position of affairs was quite startling.

"I—treat Greyfriars—badly!" stammered she, in such evident amazement, with even so much pain in her tone, that Mrs. Denby instinctively drew back a little and, in a few moments, addressed herself to the nearest person on the other side of her, leaving the earl to talk to Nannie, and presently to take a seat beside her.

"Don't look so troubled," said he gently, seeing that the tears appeared to be near her eyes. "I'm sorry, deeply, deeply sorry, if I misunderstood you. But I certainly gathered, from things you said on that night at Greyfriars, when we were in the palm-house together—you remember?"—Nannie nodded faintly—"I certainly gathered, I say, that it was not your wish to increase the intimacy between yourselves and us, even if you did not wish to break it off altogether."

If Nannie had had any idea of the earl's real motive, in wishing to make her feel how much her happiness was dependent upon the Greyfriars "set," she would have recoiled from him in horror. But he was too artful, he was in fact "too old a hand" to give the least

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

hint of the truth. On the contrary, his manner was more chivalrous, more kindly, courteously paternal, so to speak, than ever, as he noted the look of consternation on her face, and added quickly, "I can't tell you how pleased I am to see, as I do see, that I was wrong, altogether wrong."

"Indeed you were!" said Nannie, heartily. "Why, I've been wondering what I could have done to offend you all, racking my brains, in fact. And to think it was all nothing all the time! Oh!" she added, with a sort of little shiver, "I don't know exactly whether I feel more glad or more—more bewildered."

And she sat back in her corner, overcome by the strange statement she had just heard.

"Haven't you a smelling-bottle with you?" asked the earl, rather anxiously, for the suddenness of her discovery had made Nannie look somewhat pale.

"Oh, yes, in my bag," said Nannie.

And quickly, not wishing him to disturb the other ladies by a prolonged quest of a smelling-bottle, she opened her bag, and in doing so showed on the top of everything the little blue velvet case which she had thrust inside so guiltily.

"Ah!" was all Lord Thanington said.

But Nannie looking up quickly, and meeting his eyes, saw that he was unmistakably pleased. She did not know whether she herself felt most gratified that she had brought it, and so done something towards removing that false impression which the earl professed to have of her feeling towards Greyfriars, or whether she felt sorry and ashamed that she had broken her promise to Peter, in deciding to wear the jewels against his wish.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

There was nothing, however, in the earl's manner, either during the journey or after their arrival at Castle-ton, where they all went to the hotel on the front, by the pier, and had a hasty but pleasant dinner at his expense, to make her uneasy, or to disturb her feeling of thankfulness that the breach between herself and the "set" was healed.

Throughout the meal, Lord Thanington did his utmost to prove to her, not ostentatiously, but subtly and kindly, that they all looked upon her as their "star," upon whom the chief success of the evening depended. But the impression was unmistakable, and while it was undoubtedly flattering, it made Nannie rather nervous, since Major Murray was still too outspoken for her not to know to what circumstances outside her own abilities her former success was due.

The distance from the hotel to the hall where they were to act was so short that they all decided to walk thither. And it was Lord Thanington who walked by Nannie and Mrs. East-Denby, carried the flowers he had brought for the ladies, and asked so anxiously if there was anything more he could do, or anything he could get for them, that both the ladies broke out into praises of his thoughtfulness as soon as they had shut themselves into the room where Nannie was to dress.

"Lady Windermere's Fan" was, on the whole, quite as great a success as "The Tyranny of Tears" had been. The house was packed as full as it could be, and Major Murray was heard to declare that the charity would benefit by the performance to an unprecedented extent.

Nannie was as careful, as conscientious, and on the

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

whole as successful as before, though there were differences of opinion among those who had seen both performances as to whether she had "gone off" or "come on" in the interval.

As a matter of fact there was not a pin to choose, from an artistic point of view, between the two performances. Both were intelligent pieces of parroting, in which she sometimes, by luck or judgment, or by the industry of her teacher, did exactly what was right and effective, but in which she seldom fell below the level of smooth mediocrity which was all she would have been credited with if she had not been so young and so pretty.

But in one respect she had improved greatly. She was better dressed. Her rose-colored cashmere in the first act was well made and pretty. In her old white silk dress, with the diamond crescent flashing on her breast, she made quite a sensation. While in the last act her gray velvet costume with the sable trimming was voted by the ladies "quite too lovely," and carried her up to a lofty pinnacle in their esteem, as the possessor of a very pretty taste in dress.

By the time the piece was over, and Nannie had held, with Lady Cressage and Mrs. Locksley, a little reception where the people interested in the charity came to tell them without a blush how grateful they were for their noble efforts in the good cause, the little heroine of so much flattery was very tired. Mrs. East-Denby was quite peremptory in ordering her to come straight away out of the throng and to jump into the carriage that somebody had provided to take her to the station.

Nannie was very much touched by her kindness, and

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

also by the look of pleasure and gratitude which Lord Thanington gave to Mrs. East-Denby when he saw what she had done.

These two ladies drove to the station at once, and on the platform they again found Lord Thanington, who put them into a compartment of the train which was to take them back to Bredinsbury.

It had been found inconvenient to attach a saloon for him on the return journey, so Lord Thanington divided his party into three divisions. He himself traveled in the compartment which contained, besides Shirley Brede, Mrs. East-Denby, Mrs. Locksley and her husband, and Nannie.

Shirley Brede contrived to come into the corner opposite Nannie, in order to make a rather awesome communication.

"I say, Mrs. Pemberton," said he, in a low voice, while the others were fidgeting into their places, "who do you think I saw in the fourth row? I'm sure it was she: I couldn't mistake the dear lady anywhere!"

His voice, his laugh, betrayed him. Nannie grew perceptibly paler.

"Not——" began she, faintly.

Shirley nodded vigorously.

"That's it!" said he. "Guessed it first time! Yes. My dear friend Miss Pemberton was there in all the glory of a black silk dress and a tuft of something on her head which I at first took for a fungus and then for a bonnet, but which a female expert assured me was a state cap."

Nannie said nothing; but she felt uneasy. And during the half-hour's journey she found it hard to keep

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

her attention fixed on what was said to her, so certain did she feel that the spinster's presence among the audience boded no good to her.

She was right.

Miss Pemberton, brimming over with disapproval of her nephew's leniency towards his wife, and full of suspicions concerning the share Lord Thanington was to have in the theatricals at Castleton, had resolved to be present during the performance, and had been scandalized by various things she saw and heard.

Not having to dress after the performance, as Nannie and the other amateurs had to do, Miss Pemberton had caught an earlier train than they ; and long before they reached Bredinsbury she had descended upon poor Peter, who was quietly working in his study until the time should come for him to meet his wife at the station.

The consequence of her well-meant officiousness was that, when the young solicitor appeared at the station, and came face to face with his wife with Shirley Brede on one side of her and Lord Thanington on the other, his expression at once betrayed to Nannie's eyes what had happened.

"We've overtired Mrs. Pemberton a little, I'm afraid, Pemberton," said the earl, solicitously regarding Nannie, and affecting to consider that the young man's frowns were occasioned by the evident fatigue from which his wife was suffering. "But take her home quickly ; don't let her wait about and catch cold, and she'll be all right after a good night's rest."

Nannie, who understood better than Lord Thanington could do the cause of her husband's displeasure, made

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

haste to bid farewell to them all, and to get into the carriage which was waiting outside.

"Oh, why did you bring it, Peter?" she said. "It's so late. And it's such a little way I could have walked."

"I don't want to be reproached again for not looking after you," said Peter, very coldly.

And that was all he said till they reached home; and Nannie, shutting her eyes tight and leaning back in the corner, did not try to provoke the attack before the time.

When they got home, however, she had to meet it, and she walked straight into the drawing-room, turned up the lamp and looked round at her husband.

"Well," said she, "you are cross, I see. What is it?"

"You probably know," said Peter, in a muffled voice, as he threw down his soft hat and faced her.

Nannie shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, of course I do," said she, impatiently. "I knew as soon as I was told that your aunt was among the audience that she would gallop home to make what mischief she could before I got back."

"She only told me what I had a right to know, what I ought to have heard from you," said Peter, in that somber voice and terribly restrained manner that always frightened Nannie.

But now they did more than that. She felt that she was being unjustly treated, that she was too much indulged on the one hand, and certainly too harshly criticised on the other. She had just come from a group of friends, kind, merry, full of pretty speeches and grace-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

ful attentions. She felt that she had done no wrong, and she resented these constant suspicions. So she drew herself up and met him eye to eye with a spasm of boldness and injured pride.

“So you would have heard everything from me if you had given me time,” cried she. “How could I tell you what happened until I got back?”

“There is a great deal you could have told me before,” retorted Peter, sternly. “You could have told me it was Lord Thanington who was getting up these damned theatricals, that it was he who was going to take you down there and take you to dinner; that it was he who was to provide your dresses—my wife’s dresses! Good God!” cried he, with a sudden burst of jealous fury, clenching his fists and writhing under the pang given by the thought.

“I could not,” retorted Nannie, fiercely. “I couldn’t tell you any of those things, because I didn’t know. Indeed, I don’t know it now. This is the first I’ve heard about his providing the dresses.”

“Nonsense!” cried her husband, sharply. “Don’t tell me any lies; I’d rather anything—anything than that!”

“They’re not lies,” said Nannie, her voice growing suddenly more stubborn, more leaden, as she cowered under his fiery eyes. “I didn’t know.”

“How can that be? How could you fail to know what my aunt knew?”

Here was opportunity for a retort, and Nannie took it. Throwing back her head superbly, and uttering a malicious little laugh, she said:

“Surely you don’t expect me to peep and to pry and

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

to hunt out things, as Miss Pemberton does ! *I'm* not a human ferret ! ”

“ You must have known some of these things ? ”

“ I did *not* ! ” said Nannie, whose very dull stubbornness gave a strange air of insincerity to her perfectly truthful words.

“ Then—then—then,” stammered Peter, hardly master of himself, “ of course you will send back the—the—the—damned dress.”

“ Of course I sha’n’t make myself conspicuous and ridiculous by doing any such thing ! ” retorted Nannie, obstinately. “ Even if Lord Thanington did supply the money for all our dresses, which I never heard before, we’re none of us supposed to know, and it would look like silly self-consciousness to send the dress back. And to whom ? Nobody knows.”

“ I don’t care who gets it, but you shall not keep it,” roared Peter, with his fists clenched and his eyes aflame. “ Nor his diamonds either. It seems you wore his diamonds, though you promised me you would not.”

“ You let me accept them, so there was not much harm in my wearing them,” said Nannie, doggedly. “ It’s quite true I promised, and it’s quite true I felt guilty in wearing them.”

“ Guilty ! ” roared Peter, with a start.

But she checked him with quite a grand wave of the arm and sweep of her eyelashes on her pale cheeks.

“ Yes, if you call that guilt, make the most of it. It’s all the guilt I’ve ever had on my shoulders. The brooch looked beautiful, and I wanted to look nice ; so I took it with me and I wore it. And where was the harm ? ”

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"You'll not wear it again," cried Peter, and sweeping the room with his glance, he noted that her eyes rested rather anxiously on her bag, which he had himself brought in.

As he advanced towards it, she sprang upon it too.

"No," panted she, "you sha'n't—you sha'n't! I—I——"

But the fatigue of the long evening, and the excitement, and the strong emotions which she had had to battle with at the end of it all, had done their inevitable work. Before she could do more than throw herself upon the bag, with her little teeth set, guarding her treasure, her limbs relaxed, her head fell forward, and with a little sound, half cry, half murmur, she fainted away.

CHAPTER XX.

PETER was overwhelmed with remorse. Every thought but concern for his darling, every emotion except love and self-reproach, fled at the sight of her unconscious form ; with the tenderest care he lifted her up in his arms and carried her to the sofa, threw off her cloak, unfastened her dress, and sprinkled a little water on her white face.

When she opened her eyes the first thing of which she was conscious was that Peter was passionately kissing her, and for a few moments she submitted to this and feebly tried to caress his head. Then remembrance returned, and she thrust him away and started up with a cry.

“ Oh ! ” she cried, “ how can you, after what you said to me ? You can’t care for me, or else you’d believe me, you’d trust me ! Instead of that, you only believe and trust your aunt.”

But Peter was now as humble as he had previously been fierce. He had had time to cool down a little, to reflect that, even though his wife had been guilty of breaking her promise to him about the brooch, that error could not be called a grave one, since, as she said, she had only worn what he had allowed her to keep ; and, as for the rest of Miss Pemberton’s accusations, he had Nannie’s word against hers, and his wife had fair ground of complaint that he had accepted the

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

statement of his aunt without question, while he had received Nannie's own denial with incredulity.

He was ashamed of his outbreak of anger against the young creature who seemed so helpless and so fragile in his arms the moment the spirit died out of her eyes and the quick, alert movements gave place to leaden, motionless apathy. And he promised himself that he would be wiser, gentler, more considerate in the future.

When, therefore, Nannie turned upon him with this outburst, he answered in the gentlest manner :

"Don't say any more about it. You're tired, and I'm tired too, and cross, I dare say, as you said. I'm sorry if I was unkind, very sorry. You will forgive me, won't you ?"

And he came near her very humbly, offering to kiss her again. But Nannie held him off, not with any tragical vigor indeed, but with a plaintive and pathetic touch of the forefinger.

"You'll be just as unkind to-morrow ! You'll see that horrid Miss Pemberton again, and she can stir you up to believe anything against me. Just as if I could behave exactly, at my age, as she does at hers. I do try to be as like her as I can," added Nannie, with a touch of childish malice which almost made Peter laugh. "If you don't think I succeed well enough to satisfy you, you'd better send me home again, and go back and live with her once more."

But Peter would not be drawn into argument or denial.

"There, there, you're tired. Go to bed, and don't worry your head any more about my aunt or anybody else."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Now, although Peter was tired, as he had truly said, he lay awake that night long after Nannie was peacefully sleeping. That he and she were in a more difficult position than ever as far as Greyfriars was concerned could not be denied. While he was ready and anxious to believe that Nannie had known nothing of the earl's share in the Castleton performance until the previous day, he could not but feel a strong suspicion that Lord Thanington's generosity towards all the ladies had been prompted by the desire to be generous to Nannie.

This, of course, was the exact truth of the case. But Lord Thanington's calculations were so nice, his advances so subtle and so well judged, that nothing whatever could be proved against him; and the young solicitor, however strong his suspicions might be, felt that he had nothing definite to go upon. In the meantime, however, he found himself confronted anew with the question as to what amount of intercourse between Nannie and the Greyfriars people would in the future be necessary or desirable. There seemed to be danger in every direction: danger of the earl's further advances, if Nannie were to be about there on the same footing as before; danger or dulness for her, of loss of business for himself, if Peter were openly to discourage her visits to her lively friends and theirs to her.

And presently a bright thought struck him. Nannie's sister May was now staying at home, during the absence, on a visit, of the lady with whom she lived as companion. If May were to come down to Bredinsbury to stay with her sister, her presence would not only afford Nannie the pleasure and pride of showing off her house and her carriage to her, but it would afford companionship and

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

protection to the young wife, and an excuse for at least a temporary cessation of her visits to Greyfriars. When he had reached this point in his reflections, Peter, pleased and satisfied with this happy thought, fell asleep.

In the morning he left Nannie still asleep, thoroughly tired out with her exhausting day. On arriving at the office he was most careful to enter noiselessly, and to bolt into his place at the desk before Miss Pemberton could get hold of him. He did not want to have his temper ruffled by questionings, or his suspicions again roused, in spite of himself, by some adroitly-worded speech.

But if he avoided one awkward interview, he could not run away from another. Before eleven o'clock he heard the well-known tramp of Lord Thanington's famous bay, and a minute later the earl walked into the office.

Of course the elder man had the advantage of the younger. He was cool, genial, charming, in his usual manner; Peter was flustered, red, perturbed. He offered his visitor two or three chairs in succession, without knowing what he was doing; and his tone was perceptibly curt, and his hand trembled as he laid it on the desk in front of him, resuming his own seat when his client had taken one.

Nobody would have guessed that Lord Thanington had any object but that of whiling a half-hour away in the discussion of some paltry little affair or other, until he had sat, with his legs crossed and his single eyeglass as usual stuck in his eye, droning on monotonously about rights of way for at least ten minutes. Then he

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

got up as if to go, and Peter, who had not, during the whole time, recovered his usual professional composure, shot a quick look at him as he turned towards the door. At that very moment, however, the earl stopped, and, with his fingers upon the handle, and his eyes directed to the floor, said :

“ By the bye, Pemberton, I hope you won’t think me impertinent, but I had an idea last night that you seemed displeased with your wife when you met her at the station. Do you object to your wife’s playing in amateur theatricals ? I had understood that you did not. But as I had a hand in getting them up, I should feel rather guilty if I thought I had been encouraging the little lady to do a thing you didn’t approve of.”

Peter hesitated. Manly and frank as these words were, he was yet not quite so simple as to open his arms at once. When he spoke, however, he had made up his mind to be quite as frank as his visitor was.

“ No, Lord Thanington, I don’t disapprove of the performances themselves. I don’t say they are the amusement I should have chosen for my wife, but busy as I always am, I feel bound to let her take the pleasures that offer themselves.”

He paused a moment, with his eyes down, and the earl said, “ Well ? ”

Peter went on. “ But to some of the circumstances connected with these entertainments I object strongly.”

“ Yes.”

“ I object, for one thing, to her wearing dresses paid for by other people.”

“ Ah, now we come to it ! I knew there was something. Well, what objection can you have to her doing

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

what ladies in the position of Mrs. Locksley and Lady Cressage see no harm in ? ”

Peter did not say, what he thought, that Mrs. Locksley was forty-five and not personally prepossessing, and that Lady Cressage had been out a good many seasons and was a woman of a very different type from Nannie. He presently said :

“ Each man must act as he thinks right. If Colonel Locksley and Sir Philip don’t object to letting their wives wear clothes they haven’t paid for, I shouldn’t blame them ; I only say I feel differently.”

“ You are too punctilious. Don’t you see that one can’t offer ladies payment for their services, and yet one doesn’t feel justified in letting their husbands pay all the expenses of these excursions, which are got up for our benefit ? ”

Peter looked up inquiringly.

“ We, the committee who got the thing up, had all the credit of our philanthropy when we handed over a handsome sum to the charity. If we hadn’t paid for the dresses, the money would have had to come out of the sum given to the charity, since we couldn’t have let it come out of the pockets of the ladies’ husbands.”

“ Who were the committee ? I never heard anything about them,” said Peter, suspiciously.

“ Chiefly Castleton people, and, of course, me. They always get me on these affairs, as you know. Come, Pemberton, you must admit you were in the wrong. A committee is like a company : it has neither a soul to be saved nor a body to be kicked, and, moreover, it can’t make love to one’s wife. So it was rather hard that you should receive Mrs. Pemberton with sour looks

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

for the action of a body of most respectable individuals who had no thought of offending the susceptibilities of yourself or anybody else."

Peter was not convinced, and his face betrayed the fact.

"Why didn't you make known your objection sooner?" asked the earl, quietly. As Peter did not answer, he went on: "Was it because you stifled your objections while the committee was a nebulous thing of which you did not recognize the component parts? and that, as soon as you were somehow or other brought face to face with the fact that it consisted of individual men, you let emotion get the better of common sense, in other words, you let yourself be jealous?"

Peter stammered and grew red.

"Lord Thanington——" he began, without looking up.

But the earl, with a laugh, stopped him, and putting a hand on his shoulder, said:

"Ah, ha! I've found you out! When Colonel This and Captain That, and above all Lord Thanington, were found to be members of this precious committee that provided the dresses, and when, moreover, some kind friend informed you, as was doubtless the case, that these and other dangerous folk had been fluttering about your wife, running for her cabs, sending in cups of tea for her, and tumbling over each other's heels in the endeavor to do her any little service, your heart was fired within you, and you were filled with the notion of playing Othello, and must needs begin by showing yourself to her in a much less agreeable light than the attentive gentlemen who had lately surrounded her."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

“Lord Thanington, I certainly did not try——”

“Oh, don’t tell me ! I’ve been a married man myself, you know, before you were born, too. A frown at the station means a curtain lecture at home, so surely as night follows day.”

Peter bit his lip.

“Now take my advice, Pemberton, and believe that I speak for the sake of your sweet little wife, as well as for your own : don’t be jealous. If you begin you’ll live a life of misery, and so will she. Wherever she goes she’s bound to be admired, and you know you can’t keep her in a glass case. She’s as loyal and honest a little woman as there is in England, and it’s ‘Peter, Peter, Peter,’ in her pretty mouth all day long. But it won’t be always if she finds you grow ill-tempered ; for she’s certain to find other men on their best behavior.”

Peter writhed under this lecture, but the earl good-humoredly persisted.

“There, that’s about all I wanted to say. Remember that jealousy, as a motive, is out of date. It doesn’t go well with everyday surroundings. Even Shakespeare, you know, didn’t put his jealous hero into the costume of his own country, but made a Moor of him. And an Othello in coat and trousers would be as ridiculous a figure as an antiquated Don Juan.”

And uttering the last few words with a steady look into the eyes of the younger man, and with a twinkle of humor in his own, Lord Thanington went out.

Peter, loath as he had been to listen to this lecture, was bound to see that there was a good deal of sense in it, especially as the earl had been as frank in his expres-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

sion of his own admiration for Nannie as he had been in depreciation of the young solicitor's attitude.

When he went home to luncheon that day he was inexpressibly tender and gentle to his wife, and touched by the delight she showed when he suggested having her sister down to stay with them.

The idea was carried out at once. And no reference was made to the scene of the previous night, unless there was one implied in the kiss Peter pressed on her forehead as he said :

“ And I must take care to let her carry back the news to Preston that you haven't got a bear for a husband.”

When May came, there was great rejoicing. The younger sister was, of course, in ecstasies of admiration at everything ; the two young women scampered over the old house like children, chattering, laughing, making merry the whole day long. So that, when Lord Thanington requested Peter to go to Edinburgh to transact some business for him, the young man grumbled indeed that it could very well have been carried through by letter, but he did not try to avoid the task, knowing that Nannie would be safe and happy in the society of her sister while he was away.

Peter expected to be away a week, but when he got to Edinburgh he wrote rather discontentedly to his wife to say that he found the matter on which he was engaged was a much more complicated one than he had expected, and that he was afraid he should be only back just in time for Christmas, which was three weeks off

Meanwhile Nannie was to take care of herself and to write to him every day.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

She was much distressed to find that May would have to return to Preston before Peter could come back, but in the meantime the two enjoyed themselves quietly, driving out each day in the brougham, a joy and dignity of which neither was yet tired.

Peter had been away nearly a week when, as they were driving home one afternoon, they heard the gallop of a horse behind, and Shirley's voice calling out, "How do you do, Mrs. Pemberton?"

Nannie let down the window. She had seen very little of anybody of late except her sister, and she made inquiries about them all at Greyfriars.

"Oh, poor Thanington's a prisoner there—got the gout or something, and is in the lowest possible spirits. I wish you and Miss Ince would come round and cheer him up a bit."

"Why, of course we will," said Nannie, "if you think he'd like to see us?"

"Indeed, he would. We've been coming round, he and I and Mrs. Denby, and coming, and coming, for two or three days, but this attack has tied him by the leg literally."

"When shall we come?"

"As soon as you can, by all means. Why not to-day, now?"

"But he doesn't expect us?"

"He'll be all the better pleased. Do come."

On the spur of the moment, Nannie gave the order to the coachman to drive to Greyfriars; and though she had her heart in her mouth the next minute, wondering whether Peter would mind this impulsive action,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

she had not then the courage to countermand the order.

Shirley rode on in advance, and when the brougham arrived at the house, he was waiting to lead them in himself to the library, where Lord Thanington was sitting in an easy-chair, with one foot in a suspiciously loose slipper on a footstool before him.

"One of the penalties of old age, Mrs. Pemberton!" cried he, as he pointed gayly enough to his foot, and shook hands with her with much warmth.

He was touched, charmed by this visit, and Nannie thought that, nice as he always was, she had never known him quite so delightful as on that day.

She and May had not been there long when Mrs. East-Denby came in and rang the bell for tea. While she and May and Shirley Brede clustered round the piano, discussing the score of a new opera which had just come down from town, Lord Thanington kept Nannie talking to him, and asked if she had any thoughts of acting again during the winter.

"Oh, no," said she, quickly, "I don't think so. It takes up a great deal of time; you know, when one is as inexperienced as I am, I have to work so hard at every line."

"That you would have to do if you were ever so experienced," answered the earl with a smile. "No artiste can afford to stand still, and acting is one of the most difficult arts."

"It must be a very delightful one, if one could be really good in it," said she.

"Yes." The earl paused a moment and looked at her. "How would you like to take to acting as a profes-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

sion—to go on the stage in the regular way, in fact?”

Nannie's breath was almost taken away.

“Oh, I couldn't!” she exclaimed at last. “I'm not clever enough for one thing, and—and——”

“Well?”

“For another, I'm sure my husband wouldn't let me.”

“Oh, your husband!” For once there was the least shade of impatience in Lord Thanington's manner. “He would let you go on if you wanted to. He is the most obliging of men.”

“Yes, he is kindness itself,” said Nannie, earnestly. “But I shouldn't like to do anything against his wishes, as I'm sure that would be.”

“I'm not so sure. If he saw that your talent demanded that outlet, he would give way, I think, happy in your happiness. And you would begin under specially happy auspices, you know, as you have influential friends who would help you to success. Believe me, that counts for a great deal.”

“Yes, I suppose it does,” agreed Nannie.

“And I can't help thinking you would both be happier if you had some deep interest like a career on the stage to occupy your mind.”

Nannie shook her head.

“I don't think so. I should neglect my other duties, my chief duties perhaps. And then we shouldn't be happy.”

“Now, I don't think that. Those marriages are generally the happiest in which, like yours, the passionate love is all on the one side. And that side is always

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

ready to make allowance for a less absorbing devotion on the other."

Nannie looked up, flushing.

"*I am* devoted to Peter!" she said sharply.

But the very tone in which she resented the implied accusation proved to the wily Lord Thanington what, indeed, he might be said to know, and what both Nannie and Peter knew, that there was a marked, inevitable difference between the adoring love of the man and the grateful affection of the very young wife.

Quite satisfied, the earl just nodded.

"Oh, of course, of course," said he.

And then the tea was brought in, and Lord Thanington took occasion to speak in a low voice to Mrs. East-Denby. Very emphatically he spoke to her; and a little rapid discussion, carried on in undertones, took place between them. Then she went back to the tea-table, looking very pale and nervous.

Nannie looked surprised.

"Isn't Lady Joanna well?" asked she, knowing that the pouring out of the tea was a duty which Lady Joanna never relegated to any one else.

"Oh, didn't you know? She's gone up to town with Lady Vi, and they won't be back till this evening," said Mrs. Denby.

Nannie felt rather uncomfortable. She wondered what sort of story Miss Pemberton would make out of this visit to Greyfriars in the absence of its hostess, if she found out about it.

She was not allowed much time for these thoughts, however, for the talk around her was brisk and lively, considerably livelier, in fact, than it usually was under

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

the presidency of the cold-mannered Lady Joanna. May was telling them all how sorry she was to have to go back to Preston.

"I hear," said Mrs. Denby, whose face was twitching curiously, "that your sister is going to London with you on Thursday, to see you half-way on your journey northwards?"

"Yes," said May. "She can do some shopping, and as Peter is away it won't matter if she doesn't get back to Bredinsbury till late."

"I wish you'd come to my flat, Mrs. Pemberton, and stay there the night," said Mrs. Denby, turning to Nannie.

"Oh, thank you, it's very kind of you, but——"

"Well, if you can't stay, you must at any rate come to dinner. I'll take no denial to that. I'll have it at any time you like," urged Mrs. Denby.

After some persuasion, Nannie, who was grateful to Mrs. Denby for her kindness on the occasion of the last performance, though she was not specially fond of the rather enigmatical lady, consented to go to her flat to dine on Thursday after she had seen her sister off at Euston and done her shopping.

This had scarcely been decided when Nannie rose to go, and she and May went away, the younger sister with a basket of orchids which the earl had had gathered for her.

"I'll send you some in a day or two, some really nice ones," he said to Nannie herself as she shook hands with him. "I don't know how to thank you for your kindness in coming here to-day. You are a real ray of golden sunshine."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

And he bent over her hand with a tender pressure which rather disconcerted her.

"I do hope," said Nannie, anxiously, to her sister when they got into the carriage, "that—that—that—Miss Pemberton won't——"

She stopped.

"Won't what?" said innocent May.

"Oh, well, never mind," said Nannie, reflecting sagely that it would be better not to let any rumor of possible domestic troubles be wafted to Preston.

CHAPTER XXI.

"Do you like that Mrs. East-Denby, Nannie?" asked May, as she and her sister were driving back to Bredinsbury.

It was almost the first thing she said, to the surprise of Nannie, who had expected her to begin by expressions of enthusiasm concerning the beautiful house in which she had just been for the first time.

"I don't know that I am particularly fond of her, but I don't dislike her. She's been very kind to me," answered Nannie. "Why do you ask? You speak as if you had taken a great dislike to her!"

"Well, so I did," returned the younger sister, promptly. "I thought her perfectly horrid. She's got stealthy eyes, like an animal's."

Nannie laughed heartily at this description, but suddenly remembered that she had had a somewhat similar impression on the first occasion of her meeting Mrs. East-Denby at Greyfriars.

"I think she is a woman one has to know before one likes her much, I mean before one likes her at all. She is rather a strange woman, but the most interesting of all the ladies I've met there. You heard her play, didn't you?"

"Yes. She plays beautifully. She's very clever, I'm sure."

"Yet she never makes any parade of her cleverness. She's quite the most retiring of all the ladies one meets

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

at Greyfriars. Didn't you like Lord Thanington? And didn't you think the house lovely?" asked she, rather sharply, rather hurt to find that May, whom she had expected to be greatly impressed by the magnificence of her grand friends, showed no enthusiasm.

"Yes, of course the house is beautiful, much more beautiful than any I've ever seen. I didn't know houses to live in were ever so splendid as that; the hall's like a museum."

"I suppose I'd told you too much about it," said Nannie, regretfully, "so that nothing was a surprise to you. And the people: if you didn't like Mrs. Denby and Mr. Brede, surely you liked Lord Thanington?"

"No, I didn't," said May, quickly. "I thought him horrid!"

"What!"

"Well, I did. I knew you'd be angry and disappointed, but I can't help it."

"But I can't understand why!"

"Well, it seemed to me he was trying to make love to you all the time!" blurted out the sharp-eyed May, reddening as she spoke.

"May! Why, it seems to me that his manner is perfect! It's because you're not used to these people. Lord Thanington's always talking about his age, as if he were my grandfather."

"Yes, but that's only put on. He doesn't really want you to look upon him as so very old," retorted May, who was one of those preternaturally acute young women who see more at seventeen than others do at seven-and-thirty. She had always been considered the clever one of the family, but her married sister was ex-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

ceedingly disconcerted to find that she was presuming to show off her cleverness at the expense of such an experienced matron as herself. "Now, I like Mr. Brede," May went on ; "he's so lively and amusing, and he never seems to be *trying* to be anything. There's something about him, and Lord Thanington too, of course, that I've never seen in any other men, a sort of—of—of easiness that makes them seem superior to the men I've met before."

"It's because they're so well-bred," said Nannie with a nod of authority.

"Yes. Well, in Mr. Brede I like it, and in Lord Thanington I don't. I dare say you'll say it's my ill-bred radical tendencies that make me prejudiced. But you wanted to know what I thought, and so I told you."

There was a pause, during which Nannie looked both wounded and annoyed, while May put on an expression half injured, half defiant.

At last the elder spoke.

"I hope," she said, "you won't give mama a wrong impression of everything and everybody you've seen down here."

"Now, Nannie, you are silly," said May. "Do I ever tell mama anything about people? Anything to matter, I mean? If I were to talk to her as freely as I have done to you, of course she'd be writing Peter the most frantic letters."

"And you understand, don't you, that it's only your fancy and your inexperience that make you think such things?"

"Oh, yes, of course," said May. "Now don't be

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

vexed, Nannie. I had to tell you what I thought when you asked me. I know it's only because I'm not used to these grand people that I don't understand them very well. And of course I'm not used to seeing you receive so much attention. It's only since you've been down here, you know, that you've been considered such a beauty. You know, Nannie, nobody ever thought much of your looks at home."

"I know they didn't," said Nannie, humbly. "And Miss Pemberton says it's only a 'craze' to make so much of me as they do. But it's very nice while it lasts!" she added with a sigh, as she leaned back in her corner. "I'm always saying to myself: 'Now don't be spoilt. Remember you're only a little jumped-up thing, a curate's daughter and a solicitor's wife, and that if these grand people choose to turn their backs upon you, you will run down in importance at a great rate.' But then, if they do," went on Nannie with a merry smile, "I sha'n't care much. For I've always got my Peter, my dear old Peter!"

"You are fond of him, aren't you, Nannie?" asked May, earnestly.

"Indeed, indeed I am. How can you ask me!" said Nannie, with the tears rushing to her eyes; for she was even a little hurt at the question.

"I do think he cares more for you, and thinks more of you than I ever thought any man could care for anybody," May went on. "It's quite touching to see how proud he is of you, and how unselfish he is, always wanting you to be happy, and not caring how hard he has to work himself, or how little pleasure he gets out of life, as long as you can enjoy yourself."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Do you think I don't know, that I don't notice *that?*" asked Nannie, hoarsely. And May saw by the emotion in her sister's face how deep her recognition was of her husband's devotion. "May, I don't only see it, but I tell you it frightens me a little. It makes me feel, not only afraid of myself, of not being good enough for such love and kindness, but—you won't laugh at me?"

"No, course I won't."

"Well, it makes me feel a little afraid—of him. For I see there's more in him than I can understand. You see, he thinks there's more in me than there is; now I *know* there's more in him than I can even feel my way to! If he were ever to be really angry with me, I—I"—Nannie stammered and trembled a little—"I believe it would be too dreadful to bear!"

"Oh, well, well, you would never do anything to make him angry," said May, reassuringly. "Oh, there's Miss Pemberton, and she's making signs to us to stop."

Nannie frowned. But she had to stop the carriage, and let down the window, while Miss Pemberton, whom they had passed just on the outskirts of the town, came panting up.

"Why, what a long drive you've taken this afternoon! I've been twice to your house, Anne. I suppose you forgot that I was coming to tea with you and your sister!" cried she with not unnatural asperity. "Where have you been?"

Nannie hesitated a moment, wishing she had not to tell the truth. May at once spoke for her.

"We've been to Greyfriars," she said.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Oh!" said Miss Pemberton, on the alert at once. "What an unlucky day to go, when Lady Joanna was away!" As there was a disconcerted pause, she went on, "I saw the station brougham take her past my house this morning, and then go back without her. And I've just seen it go through to the station again—I suppose to meet her."

"Yes, one of the other ladies told us she'd gone up to town for the day," said May.

Miss Pemberton said nothing to this, and Nannie began, in a rather awkward manner, to apologize for being so late, and asked Miss Pemberton whether she would come on the following day instead.

"Thank you, Anne, I should prefer to come now, if I shall not be disturbing you," said she.

"We shall be delighted. I only thought perhaps it was too late for you."

So Miss Pemberton, remarking that she would be at the house almost as soon as they were, walked briskly on, and Nannie sat back with a frown on her face.

"She's rather trying," remarked May.

"Oh, I know she means well," said Nannie.

"No, she doesn't," said May. "She thinks she does, of course, but she doesn't. I've met too many of the same kind at Preston not to know the variety well."

But shrewd as May was, and anxious as she was not to encourage Miss Pemberton's love of gossip, the elderly spinster was too much for her; and while Nannie had to be out of the drawing-room for a few minutes to receive and answer a message from one of the neighbors, Peter's aunt contrived to extract from

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

May various items of information, of which she presently proceeded to make use in a long letter to Peter.

Both the girls were glad when she went away, but Nannie was rather troubled by fears of her making mischief, though she would not confess this to her sister.

The next day was a busy one, being the last of May's visit, and on the morning after, the two went up to town together, and Nannie, with regret which was not unmingled with a sort of foreboding which she did not care to try to analyze, saw May off at Euston, waved a farewell to her, and then took a hansom to Oxford Street, where she had some shopping to do.

She had been often enough to London of late to know her way about the principal streets quite well, and she passed a long and busy afternoon at a dressmaker's, and at various other places, until it was past six o'clock, when she got into another hansom, and drove southwards towards the address Mrs. East-Denby had given her.

Nannie was by this time so tired that she thought with pleasure of the kind reception she knew she might expect from Mrs. Denby, who, whatever doubts might be held about her thorough sincerity, was undoubtedly sympathetic and thoughtful in the highest degree.

When she got out at the door of the lugubrious pile of masions in which Mrs. East-Denby's flat was situated, Nannie looked up at the black mass towering above her in the darkness, and thought what a gloomy place it was to live in. She was half sorry indeed that she had accepted Mrs. Denby's invitation, the more so when she found that there was no lift, and that the flat was at the top of the building.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

However, there was no help for it ; she could not disappoint her hostess now, and so she toiled up, with her half-dozen small parcels, to the top floor and rang the bell.

The door was opened by an elderly woman-servant with a stolid, expressionless face.

To her question as to whether Mrs. Denby was at home the woman made no reply, but merely stood aside, like an automaton, for the visitor to enter.

The flat was a very pretty one, got up in the modern fashion with cozy-looking draperies, of harmonious tints, over the doors and round the looking-glasses, of which there were two or three in the little square hall.

Nannie was shown into a charming little drawing-room, prettily lighted with electric light in flower-shaped fittings, and with the usual accessories of shaded lamps, palms, flowers, and more harmonious draperies. The general effect of the room was a blending of soft tints of moss-green and terra-cotta, relieved by great piles of cushions covered with Chinese and Indian embroideries.

Nannie thought, as she sat down near the fire, noting how pleasant the warmth was, that she had never been in a prettier room.

As she leaned forward, putting her muff down by her side and advancing her hands to the blaze of the fire, she glanced up at the French clock and Dresden ornaments of the mantelpiece, and her attention was caught by an envelope addressed in Mrs. East-Denby's handwriting to herself. She rose, took the note, opened it, and read the few words it contained.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"MY DEAR MRS. PEMBERTON,—So sorry! I have been called away to see a friend who is ill, but I won't be five minutes longer than I can help. Amuse yourself as best you can till I come back. You will find something to eat in the room on your left, and you can take your hat off in the room on your right. Make yourself at home, dear.—With all love, ever yours,

"LILLIE EAST-DENBY."

Nannie thought it rather strange, but reflected that, as she had been in town all day, it had been impossible to telegraph to her. She did not suppose she should have long to wait, so she sat down again for a few minutes, and then the servant came in with a cup of tea for her, and Nannie asked how long Mrs. Denby had been away.

"I can't say exactly, madam," replied the servant, with her eyes down.

"And do you know when she expects to return?"

"No, madam."

Nannie asked no more questions, for she had taken a dislike to the woman, and had an idea, a strange and uncomfortable idea, that she was not telling the truth.

"Mrs. Denby desired I would ask if there was anything I could do for you, madam. I have turned up the light in the bedroom, but I will take your things in there for you, if you would prefer it."

And she took up Nannie's muff. But the visitor took it away from her.

"No, thank you," said she. "I don't think I'll wait. Will you tell Mrs. Denby that I had to go back earlier than I expected?"

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

The servant said nothing, merely inclined her head, then opened the door to the right, showing a most prettily got up bedroom with pompadour hangings and dark mahogany furniture, and then drew aside a heavy *portière* on the opposite side of the drawing-room, and disappeared like an attendant of the *Arabian Nights*.

Nannie was already drawing on again the gloves she had taken off. She did not know why she felt uneasy, but the feeling was nevertheless strong upon her that she wished she had not come.

She looked once more at the note, and then crossed the room and peeped into the dining-room. It was the prettiest room of the suite. A wall-paper which seemed to be of dull gold, against which charming French paintings of pretty girls crossing streets in the rain, more pretty girls laughing in the sunshine, stood out in relief. The primrose-colored ceiling was molded, and toned well with the massive mantelpiece and overmantel of light oak, which reached to the ceiling, and in which another painting, of flying cupids playing with a rainbow, made a beautiful centerpiece.

All the hangings in this room were of velvet, in tints rich yet subdued ; and against this rather somber background the sparkling glass, the graceful flowers and ferns on the table stood out on the white cloth dazzlingly, among little globes of electric light in soft pink shades.

Nannie gave one long look, turned quickly, after a glance at the two places laid, and went straight towards the outer door of the flat.

But she could not open it. She came back into the drawing-room and rang the bell, but no one answered. After the third attempt, she went again into the hall

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

and called. She got no answer, though she could hear the soft tread of the woman as she moved about on the other side of the kitchen door, the handle of which Nannie vainly tried to turn.

Now thoroughly frightened, and sure that something was wrong, though she still had only a vague idea of what was amiss, Nannie, returning to the drawing-room, went to the window, and was about to open it, to see whether it was connected by a balcony with an adjoining flat, when the sound of a footstep behind her made her turn ; and there, in the middle of the room, in his fur-lined coat and holding his hat in his hand, was Lord Thanington.

Her first impulse on seeing him was one not of alarm, but of relief at the sight of a face she knew.

" Oh, Lord Thanington," she cried, at once holding out her hand, " I'm so glad you've come ! I want to get out of this flat, and I can't. Mrs. Denby's out, and she has a servant I don't like at all, and she won't even take the trouble to answer the bell to let me out."

The earl laughed.

" Oh, that's just like old Denton," he said ; " if her mistress told her you were to wait till she came back, nothing would induce her to let you go till her mistress did return."

To Nannie's first feeling of relief at the appearance of the earl had succeeded a certain disquietude. There was something indefinable in his manner which made her now wish that she had been left to battle it out with the disagreeable Denton. She went towards the door.

" But I don't like being treated like that," she said,



The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"And I'm not going to wait till Mrs. Denby comes back."

She had opened the door.

"Oh, you'd better," said the earl, quietly. "You look very tired, and you must have dinner before you start on a fatiguing journey. I won't help you to go until you have had something to eat."

"Please, please do, Lord Thanington. I'd much rather go now, indeed."

She spoke earnestly, passionately. She was thoroughly frightened, beginning to realize her danger as she looked at the face of the earl, and saw that look there which had caused her once before a vague alarm, but which now filled her with a more deep-seated, awful dread.

"Impossible," said he. "I should have to answer to her for having allowed you to go without so much as a biscuit to sustain life and a glass of wine to warm you."

"Oh, but I've had a cup of tea."

"A cup of tea! What's a cup of tea? No, you must sit down to a good dinner, and then, if Mrs. Denby's not back by the time you've finished——"

"Lord Thanington, how can you suggest such a thing!" cried Nannie with sudden fire. "Of course I can't dine with you here without her. I can't understand your suggesting it!"

"Can't you? It's a very good suggestion, though, and one which I strongly advise you to take," said he, quite imperturbably, as he raised the heavy curtain between the rooms, inviting her to pass into the dining-room. "You may be quite sure, Mrs. Pemberton, that

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

I should never make any suggestion that had not your welfare for its object. You are the woman I most admire and most respect in the world, and you shall never suffer for anything you may do at my suggestion."

For answer Nannie made another spring towards the window. The next moment she found her arm held firmly, while Lord Thanington said very quietly in her ear :

"Don't do foolish things, my dear little lady. You may trust yourself to me, believe me. No man ever worshiped a woman as I worship you."

"You dare say that to me! *You!* who know my husband, and pretend to be his friend!" gasped Nannie, not loudly, but in a shaking voice.

"I've been a very good friend to him, but I'll be a still better friend to you. There is nothing, nothing in this world I wouldn't do to make you happy."

"Do you mean that—on your word of honor?" asked Nannie, quickly, wresting herself adroitly free, and calculating her poor chances of escape.

"Most fervently I do."

"Then let me go at once. Help me to get away. Oh, Lord Thanington, you've always been so kind to me; I've always trusted you, I was so glad to see you here!"

"And you were right to trust me, my dearest little lady. You know me to be your best friend in the world. But you know me also to be a man of whims; and my whim is now that you shall stay here till you've had something to eat. Come, is it a bargain? Take off your hat, unfasten your cape, eat the wing of a



The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

chicken and drink a glass of champagne, and then I'll put you into a hansom and see you off home."

"On your word of honor?"

"Yes, yes. Why are you so mistrustful? If Mrs. Denby is not back before then——"

Nannie shrugged her shoulders impatiently. She knew now that she had been trapped, that the most careful preparations had been made for placing her in her present predicament, and she could not refrain from this intimation of her feeling. There was, however, she saw, no help for her now; after one moment's reflection she thought it best to accept the bargain.

"Very well," said she, "I rely on your word. Give me something to eat. No, I won't go in there; I'll——"

"Yes, you'll come in here, and you'll take off your hat and cape, or you'll catch cold when you go out," said the earl.

Nannie saw his hands approaching, and she flung off hat and cape hastily, to avoid his touch. With a flash of inspiration, she saw that she would succeed better with this man if she kept her head, and used quiet tones and words instead of hysterical pleadings.

So when he again held up the *portière*, she passed into the adjoining room, sat down at the head of the table, and began hastily to eat the delicate little slice of a cold chicken which he at once cut for her.

It was a mere pretense of eating; she was choking. He poured her out a glass of champagne; she watched him narrowly, with suspicious eyes, and he met her look with a smile which sent the blood to her cheeks.

"There's nothing in it to hurt you," he said, as he filled her glass. "Drink it; it will do you good."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

But she only raised the glass to her lips ; she would not taste the wine. It was only by a strong effort at self-command that she kept herself from screaming aloud. The lonely meal without any service ; the face of the man she dreaded, smiling into her ; the very ticking of the clock, the flickering of the fire, all seemed to unite in forming a horrible nightmare, in which she did not know which sight, which sound it was that jarred upon her the most.

That was the strangest part of it, as she felt at the time : that she did not feel sure that it was this man that she dreaded the most. All the circumstances of this unhappy visit had been so mysterious, so horrible, that they formed a blend of ghastly experiences out of which she was scarcely in a right mood to single out the worst.

And in the meantime the earl leaned on the table and talked to her, and she answered calmly, listening to her own voice as she spoke, and wondering if he noticed how it was changed.

And then, clear and long, there tinkled through the flat the sound of the electric bell.

The earl did not appear to notice it ; he went on talking. But Nannie heard a step, the opening of a door, and then, turning her head quickly at the sound of a quick, heavy tread, she saw, in the next room, with his hand on the dividing curtain, Peter, her husband.

She tried to rise, but fell back in her chair with a stifled cry. For his coming brought no relief, no joy ; she knew, with one glance at his hanging jaw and blood-shot eyes, that it was with a madman that she had to deal now.



CHAPTER XXII.

LORD THANINGTON stopped short in what he was saying when he, at the same moment, saw the change in Nannie's face and her attempt to rise, and heard the shutting of a door.

"What is it? Who is it?" he said.

And at the same moment he moved his head and was about to rise in his turn when Peter, with a stride forward, came from the middle of the drawing-room to the doorway between the two rooms.

"Pemberton!" cried the earl.

Nannie said nothing. She cowered in her chair and clutched the table-cloth, staring up at her husband's face without the power to utter a word or a sound.

Even Lord Thanington, experienced man of the world as he was, and certainly prepared to find that his conduct was considered open to misconception, was taken aback by the awful appearance of Peter's livid face. It was distorted, discolored, till it scarcely looked human.

Just for one moment they were all silent; Nannie crouching in her chair, and breathing heavily; Lord Thanington trying to recover himself and to smile at the visitor; Peter glowering at the two from his place in the doorway. He had not uttered a word as yet. He just stood there, swaying slightly, as if under the influence of drink, and watching the pair like a wild beast.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

The horrible silence was broken by the earl, who rose and held out his hand.

"Why, what on earth have you been doing to yourself? You look as cold as an iceberg!"

The moment he began to speak, Peter turned a little, so as to give him all his attention, and almost at the same time he at last opened his lips, emitting a sound that was something like a short, hoarse laugh and something like the growl of a savage animal.

Before the earl had uttered the last word of his little speech, however, a change came over Peter. He looked from the face of the man before him to his outstretched hand, dashed it aside, and seizing the earl by the throat, sprang upon him and thrust his head down, with the brutal violence of a savage, upon the table among the flowers and the lights.

There was a crash of glass and china, and Nannie, springing up, uttered a little cry.

"Peter, Peter, don't, oh, don't!" she cried in a thin, shrill voice, not daring to come near him, but speaking from behind the barrier of the chair from which she had risen.

But if her husband heard, he did not heed her.

"Are you mad?" gasped out Lord Thanington, who, though he was a strong man and taller than his assailant, was powerless in the grasp of the infuriated man.

For answer Peter, who had suffered him to raise his head a little, drew back a step, and then, returning to the charge, flung the earl with so much force that he fell heavily on the floor, striking his head sharply against the table, and overturning, by the shock of the contact, two of the electric lights which stood among the ferns.



The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

There was a little crash, and one of the shades blazed up. Nannie, who was by this time past the possibility of feeling strong emotion, so deadened by fear and alarm had her senses become, took up the blazing shade and threw it into the fireplace, mechanically, rapidly.

It was a thing which, at an ordinary time, she would not have had the nerve to do.

Then she looked at Peter again, furtively, and shuddered. For he was looking at her, but with an expression so awful that it seemed to be a strange man who stood before her, a man in whose face, in whose fierce eyes and swollen features, she could see no trace of her husband's face.

As their eyes met he gave a sort of start, and she stepped instinctively backwards. Then he gave one look at the table, one round the room, and, without a word or another glance at her, turned abruptly and walked back towards the door. But he seemed to be now scarcely able to control his own movements; he stumbled against the loose folds of the curtain, and reeled rather than walked into the next room.

This, the first sign of weakness which he had given, struck Nannie with a sudden sharp pang; for the moment her fear was lost in pity; she began to realize the terrible strength of the emotions which had transformed the gentle, kindly Peter of every-day into a raving madman, and with this feeling came the impulse to detain him, not to let him go without an effort to make him understand the truth. Whether he would listen, whether he would believe, she did not know; but he must not go without hearing her, without giving her a chance of exculpating herself.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

For the strangest of all the strange things that had happened to Nannie that evening was that she knew at once that, although her husband had not attempted to attack her, had not even uttered a single word to her, he took it for granted that she was guilty, that she had deceived him. It was in this belief that he had entered, in this belief that he had ignored her, concentrating all his attention, all his fury upon the man, and treating her to nothing but contempt.

She crept into the drawing-room, and tried to speak. But it was in scarcely more than a whisper that she, after the second attempt, uttered the one word: "Peter!"

He had already had his hand upon the door. She did not venture to come very near, but as he turned his eyes upon her, she clasped her hands.

"I—I was here to see Mrs. Denby. I had no idea of meeting anybody else. Oh, surely you don't believe——"

But he would not even hear her out. Throwing back his head, with a short, hard laugh, and without more than a contemptuous glance at her pleading face, he flung open the door, went out and slammed it behind him.

She made a spring forward, screaming, "Peter! Peter!"

But before she could turn the handle she heard the outer door slam in its turn, and knew that he had left the flat.

Faint, sick, giddy and trembling, Nannie staggered to the sofa and sat down. There for what seemed a long time she sat, with her hands clenched at her sides,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

staring at the fire, too much overwhelmed, too stupefied, to think or even to suffer much.

Peter believed her guilty, believed the very worst, and he had left her, gone away and left her. She, who had been the happiest of women, the most beloved of wives a few short hours ago, was now an outcast, insulted, degraded, deserted.

These thoughts trickled through her mind, but slowly, leaving her confused, dull, inert, stupid.

It was not for some time that she even remembered that she was not alone in the flat. Lord Thanington had become so insignificant a creature now that her husband had come upon the scene that it was not until she was struck by the awful silence and stillness of the place that she raised her head, with a shiver, and remembering what had taken place in the adjoining room, asked herself whether the earl was lying dead, whether Peter had killed him.

At that thought Nannie rose indeed, shivering and with her teeth chattering, though her head was burning like fire. Listening, straining her ears, but not daring to advance quickly, she crept towards the intervening door, and grasped the heavy hangings for support. Summoning her courage with a great effort, she had not yet ventured to peep into the drawing-room further than to see the remains of the interrupted repast on the disordered table, when she heard the front door of the flat opened with a key, and whispering to herself, "Thank God!" fell back, and waited for the entrance of the new-comers, whoever they might be.

The next moment Mrs. East-Denby, her face drawn and pale and haggard, and the servant Denton, who had

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

rushed out in search of her mistress on hearing the disturbance, came into the drawing-room.

Nannie broke down then, and trying to utter reproaches and to express her fears at the same time, she burst into hysterical sobbing and sank down into a chair, pointing speechlessly to the next room.

In the meantime Mrs. Denby had come to her side, only to be held off by the indignant Nannie, while Denton had gone into the dining-room. A loud cry from her made Nannie start up and Mrs. Denby rush to see what was the matter.

Nannie held her breath, listened to the confused cries and murmurs of the two women for some time before she dared to follow them into the dining-room, where she saw them kneeling on the floor beside Lord Thangington, who was bleeding from a cut on the forehead, and whose face was paler than any human face Nannie had ever seen.

“Is he dead?” she asked.

Nobody answered her. It was not indeed until Denton had sent for a doctor that she found out that the earl was still living. It did not seem to Nannie that she cared whether he was living or not. She forgot the momentous issues which hung upon the fact, being indeed so worn out by the events of the evening that she was no longer capable of doing more than passively await the issue.

So that when the doctor had attended to the patient, whom he certified to be suffering from concussion of the brain, when a nurse had been sent for in haste, and people had been scurrying through the flat for an hour, Mrs. Denby found her at last still sitting quietly on the

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

sofa, with very little but absolute weariness expressed in her tired, haggard little face.

"Why, my dear child," said Mrs. Denby, not forgetting to be affectionate in word though she looked worried rather than loving, "I'd forgotten all about you! But I must settle something for you! I suppose," she added after a moment's pause rather diffidently, "you're not going back to Bredinsbury to-night?"

Nannie laughed mirthlessly.

"I'm not going back to Bredinsbury at all," she replied bitterly, suddenly aroused to her position with a sharp pang. "Don't you know that my husband's been here, and that he—he—he——"

She could get no further for the sobs which began to choke her. Mrs. East-Denby sat down beside her on the sofa, and would have stroked her hair, but Nannie would not let her.

"How dare you touch me? How dare you pretend to sympathize with me, when it's you who have brought it all upon me?" cried she fiercely.

"I, child, I!" stammered Mrs. Denby.

"Yes. Do you suppose I don't know that you and Lord Thanington laid a trap for me together, and that your being away was arranged?"

"On my word of honor it was not," interrupted Mrs. Denby, with so much earnestness that Nannie was forced to listen. "I had no idea, to begin with, that he would call here to-night. I——"

"Oh, nonsense," said Nannie, shortly. "These things don't happen by accident!"

"Look here, you must be reasonable," said Mrs.

Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

sharply. And Nannie liked her better in this surewifishness than she had done when she put on a sweetness which she could certainly not at that moment be feeling. "What advantage could I hope to gain from doing such a disgraceful thing as you suggest? What but reproaches from everybody, and ruin and misery? Just think, consider! You are making an infamous accusation against me, and a silly one besides. I couldn't help being called away, and I didn't expect Lord Thanington to call. If you think, you can see how easy it was for him, since the appointment you made to dine with me to-night was made in his hearing, to come up here to meet you. But I had no idea he was coming: I had no idea I should have to be out."

She stuck to her tale so doggedly that Nannie began to see that this version was just as likely to be true as the horrible one which she had believed. After listening to Mrs. Denby's protestations for some time, she rose slowly, and took up her cape and hat in a mechanical manner.

"Where are you going?" said Mrs. Denby.

"I don't know. But I want to get away from here, at any rate; I can't bear to think I'm under the same roof with that wicked, hateful man!"

And Nannie's face puckered with her abhorrence. But Mrs. Denby broke in sharply.

"Hush! he may be dying!"

And signs of true grief became only too evident on her worn features. Nannie looked at her in surprise.

"Can you be sorry for him? Can you defend him?" she said.

"Of course I can. I don't say he is without faults,

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

but he can be a good friend, a generous friend : and he has been one to me, a poor aging woman without many friends. So I'm grateful to him ; I'd do anything for him !”

Nannie was impressed. She had never seen the real side of this woman before ; but now she could peep through the crust of artifice and see that there were real feelings of some sort beneath, and she was softened a little towards her.

“ I think,” said Mrs. Denby, after a pause, speaking more briskly, “ that I'll leave the flat to Lord Thanington and the nurses, and that I'll take you to a quiet place near here, a private hotel, where we can stay a day or two until things settle down, and we understand where we are.”

Nannie demurred, but Mrs. Denby very sensibly pointed out to her that she must stay somewhere, and that she would be safer and more comfortable with some one older than herself, who knew more of London and of life than she did.

And poor Nannie, worn out and broken down, was at last obliged to accept the suggestion of this woman whom she did not much like and could not quite trust, and seek a refuge with the very person to whom, either by design or by accident she still had doubts, she was indebted for the wreck and ruin which had come upon her life.

The hotel was not very far away, and a hansom took them there in ten minutes or less. Nannie insisted upon a room to herself, and she tried to write to Peter that very night. But her tears flowed so fast, her hand trembled so much, the words she wrote down looked so

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

cold, so absurdly inadequate to express what she felt, that she was obliged to give up the notion until next day.

It surprised Nannie, on the following morning, to find that she had slept soundly all night, having been in fact too worn out with sheer fatigue to keep her eyes open long. But by day the events of the night seemed even more horrible, their result more hopeless than ever.

For it was not until now that she realized what she had lost in losing her husband's love. It was not until, in the cold, calm light of day, she could compare the gentle, kindly, unselfish Peter of her intimate home-life with the crazy, frenzied wretch of the previous night, that she understood what a gulf lay between the past and the present, what a dreary blank her future existence would be.

For, although she meant to make an appeal to him, to explain, to entreat, she felt utterly hopeless of any good result. The hard ferocity with which he had looked at and listened to her faltering words seemed to her only too convincing a proof that he, with that obstinacy which was one of his characteristics, had made up his mind against her too solidly for her efforts to be of any avail.

She saw now how it was that he had been informed of her movements, knew that it was his aunt who had written off at once to him on hearing of her visit to Greyfriars, and guessed how venomously Miss Pemberton must have insisted on the indiscretion of her going to see Lord Thanington, and how the spinster's suspicions as to the dinner at Mrs. East-Denby's flat had affected her nephew.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

In the face of these things, Nannie felt so hopeless that, when she sat down to write, she could not put into the words she wrote that passion, that force which would make them irresistible. She tore up a dozen sheets before she finished the following, which she began without heading :—

“ Why will you not believe me ? Why did you go away last night without hearing me ? I came up by Mrs. Denby’s invitation, to dine with her after my day in town yesterday. I expected to see her only. I found a note saying that she was called away to a friend. I threw it in the fire, or I could have sent it to you ; but she will tell you that this is the truth. Before she came back Lord Thanington came in. I had not expected to see him. I wanted to go away at once, but he would not let me till I had eaten something. I was miserable at having to stay, and I told him so. But he insisted. Then you came in. That is all the truth. I suppose you will not believe me, but I don’t know how you can be so cruel and wicked as to listen always to what you hear against me, and never to me.

“ I don’t suppose you will even answer this, but whatever you do, however you treat me, however miserable you insist upon my being, I shall never forget your goodness and kindness in the old days.—Your most unhappy wife,
NANNIE.”

Nannie knew that this letter was cold and formal, and absolutely inexpressive of what she felt ; but it had to go, for she had in vain tried to write a more eloquent and a better one.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Then she passed three miserable days, getting no answer. After that she persuaded Mrs. Denby to write to Miss Pemberton, begging for her intervention and explaining the facts to her. To this she received a cold reply, assuring Mrs. Denby that it was impossible to approach the subject with Mr. Peter Pemberton, who had already cut off all business relations with Lord Thanington, and behaved with so much decision that nothing further could be said.

Mrs. Denby gave this letter to Nannie, who read it through her tears. She was too much broken down even to be angry with her husband's aunt. Then she put it down on the table and sat before the fire, without a word, the picture of wretchedness.

"He means to divorce you," said Mrs. Denby, in a low voice, looking fixedly at Nannie. The unfortunate woman started.

"He can't, he can't!" cried she, fiercely. "Why, I've done nothing!"

Mrs. Denby was silent. Nannie crawled quickly along the floor to her knees, and looked up in her face with flashing eyes.

"What do you mean by saying that?" she said. "You *know* he can't, don't you? Don't you?"

"The law is hard upon us women," replied the lady, evasively.

"But it can't punish you if you've done nothing wrong! And I've done nothing wrong, nothing at all."

There was a pause, and then Mrs. Denby said, "How can you prove it?"

"I can deny it," said Nannie. "And of course Lord Thanington will deny it too."

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Mrs. East-Denby said nothing to this ; but as she maintained a stolid face and an enigmatic manner, Nannie let her hands fall down at her sides and felt a chill of horror run through her very heart. Was it possible that Lord Thanington would not deny it, or that he would deny it in such a fashion that his denial would be looked upon as an admission ? Oh, surely, surely, however much he resented her indifference to him, or Peter's treatment of him, no man, no man of rank, no man of heart, could behave so badly as that ?

CHAPTER XXIII.

"You must write to Miss Pemberton again!" cried Nannie, suddenly, starting to her feet, and running about at once in search of writing materials.

"My dear, where's the use?" said Mrs. Denby, shrugging her shoulders. "Your husband won't forgive you, won't believe a word you say. What's the use of humiliating yourself further?"

"Humiliating myself?" cried Nannie, bitterly. "I can't humiliate myself more than I've been humiliated already! I don't care what I do now, or how meekly I beg! Nothing can make me feel more degraded, more wretched than I do now."

"Oh, don't give way like that. Things will turn out better than you think," said Mrs. Denby, cautiously. "Just be quiet for a little while, and wait patiently, and you'll see that a way out of all your difficulties will be found."

Nannie stared at her inquiringly, but she did not frame a spoken question.

"Well, I'll be quiet and wait patiently on condition that you write again to his aunt, to Miss Pemberton."

Mrs. Denby shrugged her shoulders again.

"We shall only get another snub," said she.

Nevertheless, Nannie begged so hard, insisting that, although Miss Pemberton was harsh, censorious and prejudiced, she was not without heart, that at last Mrs.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

East-Denby was constrained to write a second letter, appealing to the spinster's feelings, and begging that, even if she would not intercede with her nephew, she would at least come up to town herself and hear Nannie's own explanation of the circumstances which had placed her in her present unhappy position.

When the letter was written, Nannie added a few lines of her own on the last page, appealing to Miss Pemberton's sense of justice not to help to condemn one of her own sex, without giving her a chance of being heard in her own defense.

Now in defense of the action which Miss Pemberton had taken and continued to take in the affairs of her nephew and his wife, it must be said that she absolutely believed Nannie to be a frivolous and worthless woman, who, easily corrupted by the lax tone of the society in which she had been thrown, had despised her husband's affection, and deceived him without scruple and without remorse, yielding readily to the first temptation.

It must be remembered that she had shown herself from the first so strongly antagonistic to Nannie's entrance into the Greyfriars' "set," so jealously annoyed at her rapid social advancement, that Miss Pemberton had always seen Nannie at her very worst, that is to say, either irritated into impatient silence, or goaded into an affectation of extreme flippancy, as a sort of revenge for her own sarcasms.

When, therefore, Miss Pemberton received the second letter from Mrs. Denby, with Nannie's own half-proud, half-humble note at the end, she looked upon it merely as an impertinence, and answered it on that assumption.

This, therefore, was the answer which Mrs. East-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Denby received from her, and handed over without a word to the tortured Nannie, who immediately perceived the harm she had done to her own cause by staying, as she was now doing, with a friend of Lord Thanington's, indeed the very person who had caused the worst of the mischief.

“MADAM—As the wife of my unfortunate nephew has seen fit to identify herself with you, this letter will serve as an answer to both the communications from your address which I received this morning.

“I regret that it is impossible for me to come to London at present, nor could I, consistently with my own sense of what is becoming, visit Mrs. Peter Pemberton while she is living under the protection of a friend of Lord Thanington's.

“It is equally out of the question that I should attempt to intercede with my nephew on behalf of a wife who has failed to convince him of her innocence even by a personal interview. Profoundly as I sympathize with my nephew, I can feel also for his wife, as every Christian woman should feel for another, however erring. I sincerely trust that she will profit by this terrible lesson as to the misfortunes and worse to which unchecked frivolity may lead; indeed I may say that I have no doubt this will be the case.

“Of course my nephew will make proper provision for Mrs. Pemberton as long as she leads a reputable life, whatever legal action may be the result of the late unhappy events. Mrs. Pemberton will, in all probability, receive formal intimation to this effect shortly. In the meantime we understand that Mrs. Pemberton is

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

not without resources sufficient for her immediate needs.

—I am, madam, yours faithfully,

“ ELLEN PEMBERTON.”

Nannie read this letter through with passion which reached a white heat by the time she had come to the last line. Every word had been so devised as to deal a fresh stab, and her indignation found vent at first in a torrent of incoherent protests and proud outpourings of defiance, and finally in a violent burst of tears.

“She talks, she writes as if I were the lowest, vilest creature that ever lived !” sobbed she. “Does she think I would live upon his money—now ?”

Mrs. Denby did very little to check her outburst, only uttering a soothing word or two now and then, and reminding her that this was nothing worse than she might have expected from Miss Pemberton.

But Nannie could not recover from the terrible impression the letter had made upon her, and she passed the whole of that day and the next in such somber, terrible depression that the elder lady became alarmed for her health.

And then, on the afternoon of the third day, came another blow : Nannie received all her trunks, packed with her clothes, her wedding presents, and all her special and private possessions, including, of course, the diamond crescent, which Nannie looked upon with eyes full of horror, as the origin of all her troubles.

The trunks were directed, with extreme care, in a beautiful large round hand, by her husband himself, to “Mrs. Peter Pemberton, care of Mrs. East-Denby.”

Nannie cried herself half blind over these labels : it

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

seemed to the poor child's mind that the unwavering firmness of the thick down-strokes and the fine up-strokes, in which he had written her name, were more eloquent than anything else of the inflexibility of his attitude towards her.

"How could he have the heart to write it! How could he! How could he!" she moaned, as she sat by herself by the fire in the little sitting-room which she shared with Mrs. Denby.

She was by herself that afternoon, so that she could lament at her leisure over the trunks, only one of which she had opened, and which she had caused to be piled up in one corner of the room.

She had already cried herself into a sort of sodden mental condition, and was sitting in a half-dazed state, unable for the time to cry any more, or to think any more, or to do anything but stare stupidly at the smoldering coals and the feeble column of smoke which rose from them up the chimney, when a servant came in and said that a gentleman wished to see her.

Nannie sprang to her feet with a wild hope.

"A gentleman!" she cried tumultuously.

The servant held out the card, and Nannie read the name and tossed the card into the fire.

"Tell him," she said sharply, "that I'm not at home. And if he ever comes again, you are always to say the same."

It was dusk: it had been difficult for Nannie even to read the card: now it was not until she had finished her angry speech, and the maid had turned to leave the room, that she perceived that some one was already standing just inside the door.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Nannie started back, and the servant said quickly :

“ Oh, the gentleman’s here, ma’am. Shall I turn up the light ? ”

“ No,” said Nannie, sharply, remembering her swollen, tear-stained face.

The servant left the room, and Lord Thanington came forward.

“ You ought not to have come up. I cannot receive you, Lord Thanington,” said Nannie, coldly. “ Unless you go away at once, I must. And you must understand that I will never see you again, never.”

The earl remained standing, in a most humble attitude, with his head slightly bent, and his hat in his hand.

“ I quite understand your feelings, and respect them,” he said gently. “ I will never intrude again. But this once I should like you to hear me, to receive my *amende*. It’s only fair, isn’t it ? I’m sure you wouldn’t wish to be unfair ? ”

Nannie was trembling.

After a moment’s pause she said hoarsely, leaning against the table, with her back to the light, “ Will you be fair to me ? will you go to my husband and tell him the truth, and show him that I’ve done no harm ? ”

Lord Thanington came a step further into the room, but he hesitated to answer. Nannie leaned a little further forward, and spoke with tremulous earnestness. “ Oh, surely you will do this for me ? You’re bound to, in honor you’re bound to, aren’t you ? ”

Then the earl spoke, very suavely, in his old, well-remembered tones of courtesy and kindness, which now jarred pitifully upon Nannie’s ears.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"Mrs. Pemberton, if it would do you any good for me to go to see your husband, I would start this moment for Bredinsbury, ill as I still am. But it would not. You know he has shown himself deaf to reason : you yourself were witness to his savage assault upon me : perhaps you don't know that he has refused even to carry through such business of mine as he had actually in hand at the time he left Bredinsbury. He is pig-headed, obstinate, deaf to reason and common sense, almost beyond belief. It's of no use talking to a man who won't listen."

"But he must listen ! he must and he shall believe !" cried Nannie. "Oh, Lord Thanington, you who are so clever, so persuasive, must be able to make him believe the truth, you must, you must !" There was a moment's silence.

"May I sit down ?" said he, at last, in a voice that sounded rather husky. "You know I'm only just out of the doctor's hands, and, after all, since you're appealing to me as a friend, there's really no reason why we should glare at each other in the darkness, one on each side of the table, is there ?"

Nannie made an unwilling sign of assent, and crossing the room, she turned up the electric light. When she came back the earl was sitting on one side of the fireplace, and she was able to see that he looked very white, and that a patch of sticking-plaster, half concealed by a specially long strand of his white hair, still bore witness to Peter's attack upon him. Very reluctantly, Nannie took the chair on the other side of the fireplace, with a dismal feeling that this very interview would probably be laid hold of as fresh evidence against her.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

But she was so friendless, so miserable, so hemmed in by unlucky circumstances, that a fresh one hardly mattered much.

She had scarcely taken her seat when Lord Thanington spoke again.

"As I was saying, if anything I could tell Pemberton would put things entirely right between you, I would speak at once. I would not think of my own dignity, I would argue, I would even perjure myself——"

"There's no need to do that," broke in Nannie, sharply. "It's the truth, just the truth, I want him to understand and believe."

"Well, if he did, if he were to take you back, what prospect of happiness would there be for you?"

"What prospect of happiness!" echoed Nannie breathlessly. "Why, every prospect. Why shouldn't we be happy? I've done nothing, I've thought nothing, to make me unworthy of being just as happy as I was before."

The earl smiled.

"Indeed you have not," said he. "You're more worthy of being entirely happy than any woman I know. For all that, if Pemberton were ready to take you back, which he is not"—Nannie moaned and tapped her hands restlessly the one against the other; but he went on in his smooth, persuasive voice—"do you think the man who became stark, staring, raving mad on such slight provocation, such a man as we both saw and were made the victims of the other night, would ever settle down to comfortable life with you again? Just ask yourself. You know what sort of life he would expect you to lead, you know what sort of drab-colored

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

existence would be possible for you, with a husband who would be in the future a sort of jailer, and with neighbors, who, after the way in which he's advertised his domestic troubles, would fight shy of you for the rest of their days ! ”

Nannie moved uneasily. She had thought of that, of the hum and buzz of scandal which would by this time be going on at her expense in the sanctimonious country town. The earl noted every change of her face, every movement of her little hands. He had admired this little woman from the first moment that he saw her at the little house in St. Dunstan's ; his admiration had grown on further acquaintance, for as she had improved in manner she had not lost her ingenuousness. Cynical and skeptical as to the virtue of women as he was, he had been moved to respect by the manner in which she had come through the ordeal of the past few days ; for he had not failed to keep himself informed of her doings, her sayings, and of her attitude in the late disastrous affair.

He had felt some curiosity as to the manner in which she would bear herself on this, the first occasion of her meeting him after the catastrophe : and he was interested, even touched, by the brave stand she made, and by the loyalty which saw only one way out of the present difficulty.

Tear-stained as her face was, and the earl hated tears, there was a simplicity and modesty about her which gained his admiration still, and which confirmed him in a resolution which had been for some time hovering in his mind.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

He waited for his last words to sink well into her mind, and then said :

“ Not a pleasant picture, is it ? ”

Nannie sighed lightly.

“ I can't expect it to be all pleasant,” she said at last. “ After all, I have something to pay for ; I began too well ; it was all too bright to last.”

Lord Thanington smiled again ; she was not looking at him, so it didn't matter.

“ We'll find some more brightness instead of that you have lost,” he said in a measured tone.

Nannie shook her head.

“ If what you say is true, and he won't take me back, I shall never be happy again,” she said.

“ Oh, yes, you will.” There was a moment's pause. “ Have you thought what you would do, where you would live, in that case ? ” he asked in a lower voice.

The tears welled up again to Nannie's eyes.

“ Yes. I wouldn't be a burden upon him, though he is unjust,” she said quickly. “ I would earn my own living.”

The earl gave a slight nod of satisfaction.

“ Of course you would go on the stage.”

To his amazement, Nannie turned upon him indignantly.

“ Indeed, indeed I would not,” she said sharply. “ Anything rather than do that ; he wouldn't like it.”

“ What has what he likes to do with it, when he treats you badly ? ” asked Lord Thanington, irritably.

Nannie rose, and looked full into his face for the first time.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"He treats me so badly," said she, earnestly, "because he loved me so much. Some day he'll believe me and forgive me."

"Forgive you?"

"I mean take me back," said Nannie, simply. "I can't help feeling even now that the fault must be on my side," she added tremulously, "because he was always so good."

Again the earl was rather touched. He rose quickly, with a slight laugh.

"I'm afraid you'll find you've depended rather too much upon his goodness," said he. "A man doesn't usually take back the wife he has divorced."

The word frightened Nannie again, as it had done before; she leaned against the table and refused to take Lord Thanington's offered hand.

"You won't believe," said he, gently, "that I'm your most true, real friend?"

"I can't," said Nannie. "And you must please take this back." She snatched up the crescent from the open tray of her trunk, and insisted on his taking it into his hands.

"You won't keep it—in memory——?" he began.

"No," said Nannie, shortly.

And he went out with a shrug of the shoulders, annoyed, puzzled, surprised, but interested too.

When he was gone, Nannie turned out the light again, and lay, sick, shivering, miserable and lonely, until she was suddenly seized with the idea that she would not stay with a friend of Lord Thanington's any longer. Even while she was debating, however, where she should go, Mrs. East-Denby came in, and

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

Nannie at once informed her of her intention to look for some other rooms.

"I shall go into cheap lodgings," said she, "and get some pupils for music and French. Lord Thanington's been here, and I won't run the risk of meeting him again, as I may do as long as I am with you."

It was of no use to argue with her, therefore Mrs. Denby contented herself with obtaining a promise that Nannie would finish out the week, while looking for her new lodging.

Two days later, however, before the week was over, Nannie, who had been to answer an advertisement for a nursery governess, was astounded and dismayed to find, when she entered the sitting-room on her return, not only Mrs. Denby, but Lady Cressage, Shirley Brede, and Lady Violet.

This last discovery touched Nannie. She turned first red, then white, as Lady Vi, who had never been very nice to her before, shook her by the hand, and asked her what she had been doing out of doors on such a wet day.

"Oh, I've been looking for pupils," said Nannie, reddening a little. "And I think I've got some."

"You talk as if they were trout, and you'd just made a good catch," murmured Shirley.

"It is a good catch—for me," said Nannie, trying to smile.

"Oh, of course it's very fine of you to go and earn your own living and all that," said Shirley, "but why be a governess? It's such a fusty, green-moldy sort of a profession, now, isn't it?"

"Sh! Shirley, be quiet," said Lady Violet. "You

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

promised, if we brought you, that you'd be discreet, but you're not."

"Oh, I'm just as discreet as you expected me to be," retorted Shirley, boldly.

"It's very kind of you all to come," said Nannie, gratefully, turning to Lady Cressage. "More kind than I can say," she added in a lower voice. "I shall take care my husband hears of it. It will show him—will show him——"

She broke off, afraid of tears.

"Don't worry your head about him, dear," whispered Lady Cressage back. "He simply doesn't deserve a nice wife. And don't you worry your head about the case, either. I've known lots of women who've been divorced, much worse cases than yours too, and they've never turned a hair. Just lie low, and let things slide, and you'll come out all right on top."

It was in vain that Nannie, aghast at this way of looking at things, tried to prove to her that all she desired was that there should be no "case," but that she should be able quietly to work her way back to her husband's confidence by the strict praiseworthiness of her own behavior. Lady Cressage smiled, and shook her head, and would not listen.

It was not until the lively visitors had gone away that Mrs. East-Denby explained things.

"Lord Thanington's told them," said the elder lady, simply, "that after you've been divorced he's going to marry you."

"What!" cried Nannie, leaping to her feet.

"It's true, perfectly true," said Mrs. Denby. "And

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

your husband knows it. Within twelve months you'll be Lady Thanington."

The elder lady thought this piece of news would be a *bonne bouche* indeed, and she was unaffectedly amazed when Nannie, pale, wild-eyed, stammering, overwhelmed, declared that she would rather die, that she hated Lord Thanington, that if Peter divorced her she would throw herself into the Thames.

It was in vain that Mrs. East-Denby pointed out the brilliant advantages of the rank of a countess, told Nannie that the family jewels were dazzling, and that she herself used to admire and like Lord Thanington very much.

Nothing would reconcile the unhappy young wife to the prospect of a marriage which once would have seemed to her the height of splendor and delight. The little creature was a true-hearted woman, and bitterly as she was hurt by Peter's hardness and mistrust, bewildered as she was by the sullen obstinacy with which he refused to listen to her, she felt the shame and the disgrace of what was before her, and could see no solace in the brilliant dignity which she was assured was to compensate her for the ordeal.

She would not see Lord Thanington, would not send him a message in answer to his. But she left the hotel at the end of the week, and took up her abode in the one room which she had engaged for herself in a dingy house in a dingy street, where there was nothing to look at outside, and nothing to cheer her inside.

She had been there three days when Mrs. East-Denby came in upon her with agitation and dismay in her face.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"My dear child," said she, "prepare for bad news, dreadful news, for a great disappointment."

"I'm always prepared for bad news now," said Nannie in a pitiful voice, as she turned to face her visitor drearily.

"Well, then, listen. Your husband won't divorce you."

In spite of all Nannie's protests, Mrs. East-Denby had believed that the prospect of marrying Lord Thanington must have given her secret consolation. She was therefore really surprised when Nannie started up, and dancing round the room, cried, "Oh, I'm so glad, so glad, so glad! I could cry for joy!"

Mrs. East-Denby looked at her contemptuously.

"Silly child!" said she, "you don't understand. He hasn't forgiven you; he won't forgive you. He's refused to divorce you out of revenge."

Nannie had stopped short, and her face fell ever so little.

"I do see that, I do understand," said she. "But I don't care. Things are quite bad enough, I know; oh, I can see that quite well. But they aren't quite *so* bad. There's no dreadful case to be gone through, no disgrace and exposure and—and—and—all that." And she shuddered. "And"—her face grew eager in the light of the one candle—"why, now I can at least"—her voice fell—"hope!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

NANNIE spent Christmas all by herself, in her one room, cheerlessly enough. Not that she felt it to be any special hardship that it was Christmas-time, for she was so utterly miserable and hopeless that one season was the same as another to her. The ray of hope which had been shed upon her momentarily by Mrs. East-Denby's announcement that Peter would not divorce her had long since faded away.

For if he had been actuated by doubts of her guilt, he would surely not have been content with allowing this fact to come to her ears through other people ; he would have written to her, or have caused some one to write to her, telling her of what he had resolved upon.

As it was it did indeed seem as if Mrs. East-Denby's assurance was the truth, that Peter refused to set his wife free in the belief that he was thereby punishing both Lord Thanington and herself.

Nannie had begun to be thankful even for the affectionate attentions of Mrs. East-Denby, who had been unremittingly kind up to this point. When, however, she understood that all prospect of Nannie's becoming Countess of Thanington was at an end, her visits grew less and less frequent, and when she did call, she was no longer so assiduous or so kind as of old. On one occasion she even went so far as to tell the unhappy little woman bluntly that she had not played her cards

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

well; and the expression dwelt painfully in Nannie's mind, and opened her eyes as to the amount of disinterestedness there was in Mrs. East-Denby's friendship.

Once or twice, when the elder lady had begun to give her messages from Lord Thanington, and to sound her as to the possibility of her falling in with his wishes that she should go on the stage, Nannie had cut her short so sharply that the wily woman of experience perceived there was more character in the young wife than had been supposed.

And thus it happened that the New Year arrived to find Nannie still living miserably by herself, still brooding over her sorrows and her unmerited disgrace, without any occupation or any companionship to divert her thoughts.

The first week of the year was hardly over, however, when the smaller and dirtier of the two small and dirty servants who did the work of the lodging-house came up to tell her that there was a gentleman down-stairs who wished to see her.

"Missis said I was to show him into the second-floor sitting-room, as Mrs. Greystock was out. So he's in there waiting."

Nannie stood up, trembling. The visitor had sent up no name, and she was afraid of another encounter with Lord Thanington, and could scarcely dare to hope it was Peter.

"What—what is he like?" she asked, trying to command her voice.

"Oh, he's a most nice-looking gentleman, ma'am, with such a merry eye it looks as if he was a-laughing

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

the whole time!" said Martha with scarce concealed admiration.

"Oh!" said Nannie.

She knew now who it was, and tried not to be glad. But her face shone, as she entered the second-floor sitting-room a few moments later, with the pleasure of this sudden influx of something like a ray of sunshine into her gray, monotonous, miserable life.

Of course the visitor was Shirley Brede, who rushed forward to meet her with the impetuosity of a school-boy, and after the fashion of a schoolboy proceeded at once to make most uncomplimentary and unkind remarks about her appearance.

"Why, how wretchedly ill you look! I never saw you looking so ill! What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Nothing," said Nannie with a quivering lip. "And you, are you staying in town, or have you come up from——?"

She stopped. She could not utter the word "Greyfriars."

"Oh, I'm staying down in the country, but I'm up for a couple of days, and I told them I must call and see how you were getting on. They said I oughtn't to, Lady Vi said so and Lady Joanna. Do you think I oughtn't to?"

"If they both said so, I suppose they must be right," said Nannie, smiling for the first time for many a day.

"Well, then, I'll go down-stairs and tell the people I'm your cousin," said Shirley, making for the door, as if with the intention of carrying out this threat. "Then it will be all right, won't it?"

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

"I don't think I should trouble my head about that now," said Nannie. "Sit down, and tell me—tell me about—everybody. Did you have a merry Christmas?"

"No, it was simply the most beastly Christmas I ever spent," replied Shirley, viciously. "Of course people always look upon Christmas as no end of a bore, with its forced high spirits and forced high feeding and all the rest of it. But, by Jove! when you've tried a Christmas without the high spirits, then you see the conventional thing's the best, after all."

"Yes, I should think so," murmured Nannie, just to say something.

She was so happy in seeing a friendly face, in hearing a merry voice again, that all she desired was to keep quiet, and look and listen.

"Yes. You must know that old Thanington—you don't mind my boring you with all this gossip?" Nannie, who had shivered slightly at the name, shook her head, and he went on: "Well, he was in black low spirits, wouldn't have any of the usual gayeties, wouldn't have a dance, wouldn't give a dinner. So we all moped and sulked, and quarreled and drank too much—at least I speak for the masculine portion, and of course except myself—and altogether we had a beast of a time! What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," said Nannie, who was trembling with a question she was longing to ask, but dared not. "I just sat in my room, and—and that's all."

There was a short pause. Then Shirley said gently, in a different tone, "Why don't you go to Lancashire to see your own people?"

"I'd rather die!" flashed out Nannie, fiercely.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

“Why, do you think I’d let them know——” She checked herself, and tried to turn the conversation.

But Shirley wouldn’t let her.

“Then why don’t you go to Peter?”

Nannie quivered from head to foot. The question was so daring, it came upon her so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that she found herself face to face with a serious proposition, without chance of evasion or escape.

“I daren’t, I daren’t,” she whispered hoarsely. “I have written, and he won’t even answer. Oh, pray, pray don’t talk about it! I—I can’t bear it!”

“You mustn’t think me impertinent,” said Shirley, very gently, drawing his chair a little nearer, and lowering his voice. “But nobody else likes to speak to you about it, and so I must. You can’t go on living like this——”

Nannie looked up, but not at him, interrupting him quickly.

“It’s very good of you, very kind,” gasped she. “No, it’s quite true I couldn’t go on like this. But in a couple of weeks I shall have my pupils; I’m only waiting for the end of the Christmas holidays to begin with them, and then——”

“Yes, but what sort of a life will that be? And in the meantime—you must excuse my boldness, Mrs. Pemberton, but I’m not speaking for you only. I saw your husband in the street at Bredinsbury the other day, and, I think, if you’d seen the change in him——”

Nannie sprang up with a cry.

“Oh, don’t, don’t!” she cried.

“Well, well, you ought to know. Look here, I’m not a domestic man myself; I’m not a bad husband, but

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

I'm not what you'd call a devoted one ; like to see my wife once a month or so, to see she's getting on all right ; but that's enough for me—and for her ! But some men are not like that ; your Peter isn't. Come, come, don't cry. It's of no use to cry, and it makes me feel such a brute, you know. But I really think you'd better think of it. Just look in one day ; say you've forgotten to leave word where the key of the store-cupboard's kept. Anything. But"—and his light tone became earnest—"but *go*. See ?"

Nannie was silently sobbing, Shirley beat one foot restlessly on the ground.

"Look here ! Do leave off," he said. "If you don't, I shall have to come and dry your eyes for you, Mrs. Pemberton, and that wouldn't be proper ! Come, come, say you'll think it over, and—and *don't lose any time*."

Nannie hastily dried her eyes, gulping down another sob.

I don't understand you," she said quickly. "I've always been used to look upon you, as everybody else seems to do, as an irresponsible and unprincipled person, with no thought except for your own enjoyment. And here you are, the only person in the world who has the sense and the kindness to come here and tell me to do just the right thing. Although I don't think it will be of any use, although I'm horribly afraid of having to go, yet I feel, after something you said, that it *is* the right thing, and I shall do it. But it *is* strange that it should be you, and I feel that I've done you great injustice."

"But you haven't !" replied Shirley, lightly. "It's

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

quite true I like to take all the enjoyment that comes in my way. If you'd been the sort of woman Thanington thought, and if you'd gone on the stage as he wanted you to do, or if you'd married him as he was really anxious in the end that you should do, I should have made love to you——"

"How can you say such a thing to me?" said Nannie, reddening and indignant.

"Well, I'm just telling you the truth. It's one of the few good points of us 'bad' people that we don't tell quite so many lies as the 'good' ones. And I don't want you to make any mistakes about me. It's not wise to make mistakes about people, as you know. You made a mistake about Thanington; he's a good old chap, a dear old chap, but his views of life are not yours, and his code is not the same as Peter's."

Nannie could not bear the sound of her husband's name without a restless movement. Shirley noted this, and he did not linger much longer.

When he rose to go, he held her hand, looked down at her for a moment and said in a low voice:

"*Au revoir*, Mrs. Pemberton—at Bredinsbury!"

Nannie made no answer, but just made a doubtful sign with her head as he went out.

It was half-past four o'clock when Shirley Brede left the house; by twenty minutes to five Nannie was in the street outside, on her way to Victoria. She dared not wait until the following day, for fear her courage should fail her.

There was a train leaving for Bredinsbury at five thirty-three, timed to arrive at seven twenty-five. Nannie caught this, and crept into a compartment in a

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

shamefaced way, fearful of being seen and recognized by some passenger who might know who she was.

For it was with little hope of a happy issue to her enterprise that Nannie was starting. She told herself doggedly that what she was doing was the right thing to do, that Peter ought to hear her now, when the excitement of his first shock of rage and horror was past. But the hard sternness with which he had left her appeals unanswered made her still believe that he would turn a deaf ear to her pleadings, to her explanations. And then if he were to look at her again as he had looked that night at the flat, Nannie felt as if she should scarcely have strength and spirit enough left to stagger out again on her way back to her dreary lodging in London.

It was, of course, quite dark long before she reached Bredinsbury. And the station was so ill-lighted, and she, in her dark dress and veil, hurried out so quickly, that there was really little fear that anybody would know her as she passed.

Indeed Nannie was past that fear now ; her brain was throbbing with intense excitement, in which longing to see her husband now began to mingle with her terror of what his reception of her might be.

It was with the fleetness of a deer that she skimmed along the road that led from the station to the old house, the sight of the gables of which, when she turned the corner of the street into St. Dunstan's, filled her with such a frenzy of feelings that she stopped short and almost staggered, and had to collect herself a little before she could go on.

The wide old street was almost deserted at the part

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

where the old house was. It looked dark and blank and cheerless, Nannie thought, without one light visible in any part of it. Not even the hall-lamp had been lighted.

Was Peter away? Had he gone back—the thought was full of unspeakable horrors for Nannie—to live with his aunt again at the little house on the other side of the street?

If so, she told herself, with a sudden rush of blood to the head, she must go back as she had come. She would not be brought face to face with two accusers: her spirit rebelled at the thought of finding her husband and his aunt ranged side by side against her. However foolish, however indiscreet she might have been, she had not deserved such a judgment bar as that.

Even as these thoughts crowded into her mind, however, Nannie, coming slowly nearer to the old house, found out that she had made a mistake. There was one light burning in the lower part of the overhanging building: faint slits of lights which came through the cracks in the old shutters on the left showed that there was some one in the study.

It was Peter, it must be Peter, bending as usual over his work at the desk.

Such a rush of joy surged through Nannie's heart at this thought that she was herself bewildered by it. She had come to the town full of fear of her husband; and behold, now that she was once more near him, now that she saw with her own eyes the first actual sign of his presence, nothing but mad eagerness to see him, nothing but a sudden longing to tear through shutter

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

and blind and curtain, and to look once more upon his face, had in an instant taken the place of the horror and the dread.

It was the power of association, the instinctive and immediate effect of looking once more upon the house where she had seen him always gentle, always loving, always kind, which did this; but Nannie could not know that. All she was conscious of was the rising hope, the enthusiastic longing. And it was in this mood that she rang the bell, and listened keenly to the well-remembered tinkle.

When she heard the servant's tread in the hall, however, her heart had already begun to fail her; when the door was opened, and the girl, recognizing her in the darkness, could only cry hoarsely:

"Oh, oh, is it you, ma'am?" Nannie was too much agitated to do more than bend her head in answer.

"Is—is Mr. Pemberton alone?" she asked in a whisper, when the girl had shut the door.

"Yes, ma'am, he's in the study," whispered the girl back. And then she added, timidly but warmly, "Oh, ma'am, I'm so glad!"

Nannie just laid her hand for a moment kindly on her shoulder, but she could not speak again. She waited until the girl had disappeared into the inner hall at the back of the house, and then she opened the door on her left, and went hesitatingly in.

There was a little fire burning low in the grate on her right, and beyond was Peter bending over his desk, just as she had expected. From where she stood she could only see his head, with the light of his working lamp full upon it. But she was startled to see that it

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

was not the ash-colored head she remembered ; his hair was gray.

She uttered a sort of sob. And then she knew, by a movement of his head downwards, by the fact that the hand which held the pen was not moving, that he had heard her, that he knew she was come.

Was he going to refuse even to look at her ?

She came forward by a step, and whispered his name. Then he turned and looked at her. It was not quite the old face ; he was lined, careworn, aged. But it was the old look, the old love, the old light which she saw in his eyes.

“ Peter ! Peter ! she sobbed out, as she threw herself at his feet, and was caught, drawn up in his quivering arms.

He gave her one long look before he kissed her, his face twitching, his eyes searching into her very heart. Then he just said gruffly, “ Thank God ! thank God ! ” and hugged her tightly, moving from side to side like a mother hushing her child.

It was a long time before either spoke again, not till Nannie had cried herself half blind on his breast. Then she struggled back a little, and looked up in his face.

“ Peter,” whispered she, hoarsely, “ how could you think I would have gone to meet him by appointment, intentionally ? How could you ? ”

He started, and looked earnestly in her face.

“ *Didn't you ?* ”

The words, the doubt implied, filled her with horror.

“ Do you think I could have come back, could have asked you to hear me, to take me back, if that had been

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

true?" she asked in a voice which showed how deeply shocked she was.

His face worked violently for a moment ; and then he burst into violent sobbing.

"God knows," stammered he, huskily, "it would have been all the same. I'd have taken you back, I'd have forgiven you anything, *anything*—I love you so !"

The words inflicted, at the first moment, a sort of wound on the startled Nannie. They were not heroic, they were the confession of a weakness, of a want of proper pride such as she would not have expected in the obstinate, stolid man. But they were so human, so touching, so overwhelming to her, that they seemed to tear though into recesses of her heart unknown to her before. From that moment it was no question of a lover and a woman who lets herself be loved. Nannie gave to her husband in love, in tenderness, the equal of what he gave to her.

In the days that followed, the whole story grew plain and clear to the one and the other. Nannie was honest, and took her share of the blame for what had happened. When her husband would have excused her indiscretion on the score of her ignorance, her innocence, Nannie, confident in him, in his tenderness, his justice, told the truth.

"I ought to have known, I might have known," said she. "It wasn't as if I'd never heard anything about Lord Thanington. But it was easier and pleasanter not to know, not to understand. And so I didn't, because I wouldn't. Don't you think, Peter," she added dubiously, "that that is usually what's called innocence?"

Peter would not discuss the point. He was happy

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

again, utterly, entirely happy. He, on his side, had begged her forgiveness for what his stubborn obstinacy had cost her. His silence, the silence which she had taken for unbending hardness, had been caused by very different feelings.

He had been frenzied at the thought that she did not care for him, that she had been alarmed by his appearance, instead of relieved. At any moment, so he now told her humbly and penitently, he would have received her back with open arms, if only she would have come to him. It was the thought that she was ready to meet Lord Thanington, and yet not willing to trust herself to a meeting with himself, that had maddened Peter, and made him try to steel himself, to stand out against the woman whom he believed to be false to him in heart at least.

"I couldn't have held out much longer, Nannie," he confessed pitifully in her ear. "But why, oh, why, child, didn't you come to me before? Well, there, there, never mind! After all, this was what I wanted—that you should come back of your own accord!"

Both husband and wife were at first rather nervous as to the way in which Bredinsbury would look upon them after the rumors which had been flying about of late. But things were smoothed over much more easily than they expected.

In the first place, Nannie, after the excitement and misery she had gone through, was taken ill, very ill, to the despair of Peter, who reproached himself unceasingly for having let his pride get the better of his love for so long. But this illness, by giving people an excuse for calling to inquire after Mrs. Pemberton's health, un-

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

doubtedly helped to smooth the way back for her into her old circles again.

And the people from Greyfriars, with Lady Joanna at their head, made their inquiries too, which was a fortunate thing for Nannie's reputation.

When she recovered, however, a change had come over young Mrs. Pemberton. She paid her duty-call at Greyfriars, as she did everywhere else, but she declined all invitations there which did not include her husband ; and there was noticeable a certain gravity, a gentleness, which had not been seen in her manner before, the result of impressions which could never be forgotten, never be wholly effaced.

Only once did her new sweetness give place to something unexpected in the way of spirit and passion : this was when Miss Pemberton called upon her during her convalescence, and dared to begin a well-considered lecture upon the dangers of undue frivolity, and of association with undesirable companions.

Then Nannie, who had been secretly brooding over Miss Pemberton's undoubted efforts to widen the breach when it existed between her and her husband, took fire, and turned upon the harsh spinster.

"Miss Pemberton," she said, meeting the hard eyes of the elder lady in fearless and determined fashion, "I've submitted to a good many lectures from you, and it's now my turn to tell you the truth about yourself."

"Anne!" exclaimed the astonished lady. "Do you presume to think that I have been actuated by any but the best motives?"

"Yes, I do presume to think so," said young Mrs. Pemberton, sharply. "I think, as everybody else

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

thinks, that it was your clear duty to have done your best to find out the truth about me, instead of taking the worst for granted, as you immediately did, poisoning my husband's mind against me, and doing your best to keep us apart afterwards, so that I might have no chance of being heard."

"Believing that you were unworthy of him, it was my duty to do as I did," persisted Miss Pemberton.

"Then your sense of duty makes you more unchristian than the people at Greyfriars, whom you pretend to despise," retorted Nannie. "They came to see me; it was one of them who told me to come to Peter. Miss Pemberton, judged by your own Christian standard, those are the people who are followers of Christ, who are merciful and charitable and slow to judge, and *you* who are unworthy, and cruel and wicked, compared to them."

"Anne!" stammered the amazed Miss Pemberton.

"I don't want to say any more," said Nannie, more gently. "I don't want to pretend I've not been to blame myself. But I can't let the people who've been my friends be spoken of as if they were without virtues and good qualities, just because their virtues and good qualities are not the same as yours. There, now, you'd better forgive me for speaking out. For you know that, if I liked, I could make Peter hate you, and I don't want to do that."

After this, Miss Pemberton recognized the necessity of changing her tone towards the young wife, and became dimly aware of the fact that her own conduct was not generally considered so praiseworthy as she had liked to suppose.

The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton.

For the fact was that Nannie was popular, and that her acquaintances were glad that the ugly rumors need only remain rumors, and that the pretty young woman who had taken Bredinsbury by storm was not to be reckoned among those whom one "couldn't know."

Indeed they never again had occasion to speak anything but well of poor little Nannie, whose heart had found its home at last with a fulness of joy it had never known before.

But the time of storm and stress had taken something from Nannie's beauty and bloom. And though she always remained a perfect beauty in her husband's eyes, she was no longer so widely spoken of, after that terrible six weeks, as "the lovely Mrs. Pemberton."

THE END.

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This is a strongly written story, with a vein of tragedy running through its length. The reader almost immediately conceives a peculiar sympathy for the little country girl whom the benevolent old Squire, with a love for music, assists to a career of fame upon the stage as a fair violinist. Marjory's fortunes, like those of many others who court the applause of the fickle public, suffer a collapse, and the arm upon which she expected to lean fails her; but in the end she finds a heart of gold and the story ends happily. It is really a charming romance, and will please a large share of the reading public.

The well-known authoress has never given us a stronger picture of humanity in its various phases. Marjory is decidedly feminine, and naturally chooses the lover whose handsome face appeals to her girlish heart; but through bitter trials she learns her lesson, and when the storms have passed finds a safe harbor in the heart of the honorable lover who has lived but to serve her since girlhood.—*American*.

It is very rarely our good fortune to meet with a novel that is written well from the first page to the last, and when this luck has come in our way, we are not slow to return good for good, by cordially giving thanks for pleasure received, and by hastening to tell our readers where to obtain fiction that is a credit to English literature. "Marjory Moore" is a novel of an old-fashioned flavor, but none the less pleasant because of this quality. It borrows nothing from melodrama.—*News*.

There is much skill in the study of the female characters, and the story is attractive.—*Courier*.

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The Golden Tooth

By J. MACLAREN COBBAN

306 pages, size 7½ x 5, Cloth. Ink and Gold, \$1.25

"The Golden Tooth," by J. Maclaren Cobban, is an amusing story with a Sherlock Holmes theme. The author knows how to write a fascinating and entertaining tale, and if he shows a lofty indifference to real life in the drawing of one or two of his characters, he is to be forgiven. The real hero of the story is Townshend, otherwise "The Marquis," who takes an interest in explaining the mystery surrounding the murder of the young Squire Kesteven. The golden tooth furnishes the clew by which the assassin is traced and the squire's stepmother plays a principal part in the plot. She is a well-known character, who takes the role of a petticoated villain. The young farmer-soldier suspected of the crime turns out to be the real squire and the novel ends happily for all concerned. The astute Townshend is a man in whom the reader can place reliance. There is a comfortable feeling that he will deliver the innocent and discover the guilty. That he fulfills even the most sanguine expectations proves his claim to recognition as a first-class literary personage.—*Milwaukee Sentinel*.

"The Golden Tooth," written by J. Maclaren Cobban and published by F. M. Buckles & Co., of New York, is a rattling good detective story of much more than the average merit. It is a live book from the quarrel on the opening page to the final triumph of innocence. It draws much more upon the sympathies of the reader than the average "hunt-down-the-guilty-party" stories, and the delineation of the character of Jenny Wren is far above the average character studies of women. Another delightful character of the tale is Townshend, the "Markis" who does a great deal of good detective work for the sake of humanity and the cause of "the good little woman." The story is a good one and to be recommended to any one who likes stories with human nature, a good deal of swing to them and those that leave a "good taste in the mouth."—*Syracuse Herald*.

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The Plain Miss Cray

By FLORENCE WARDEN

327 pages, size 7½x5, Cloth, ink and gold, \$1.25.

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After a careful study of the history of humor from the time of Noah to the Sunday comic supplements, Mark Twain declared that there were really only thirty-nine genuine original jokes as the sum total of human effort in that direction. A study of the novels of the year justifies the assertion that there are only two kinds of novels—those in which everything ends all right and everybody is happy and those in which everything is all wrong and nobody is happy. Of this latter class of novels we have had a surfeit recently, and can afford to thank Miss Warden for turning back into the paths of optimism, of cheerfulness and peace, as she does in "The Plain Miss Cray."—*New York World*.

"A novel in which poetical justice is fearlessly dealt out," a writer in the London Literary World humorously remarks, "has become almost a thing of the past." For those who have found this a hardship "The Plain Miss Cray," by Florence Warden (F. M. Buckles & Company), will doubtlessly appeal. It is perhaps enough for the intending reader to know that the heroine whose name figures in the title of the book, triumphs over the villain and her prettier rivals with ease. Those who "get enough of life as it is" and want something else in their fiction can obviously take up this volume with confidence.—*N. Y. Evening Telegram*.

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